

media art

**TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF ARTS
IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY**

Media Art Festival

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Stephen Partridge (University of Dundee)

Fabio Severino (State University La Sapienza/Association for the Economy of Culture)

Gaby Wijers (LIMA Director, Amsterdam)

Artistic Director:

Valentino Catricalà

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TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF ARTS IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

edited by

Valentino Catricalà



Gli
Ori

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Foreword

Stephen Partridge

Dean of Research, Chair of Media Art at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee

This publication and the festival with which it is associated – takes an anthological approach to Media Art, with a focus upon the host nation but in a wider European context. This is apposite, as the term Media Art is quintessentially European rather than Anglo-Saxon, where it has not thus far been comfortably adopted as a collective label for the wide variety of artistic activity that has been produced and developed since the early 1980s. There is presently a diverse range of practice: Media Art can encompass many media and art-forms (film, video, sound – sound art, time based art, performance art, installation art, computer art, sci-art, interactive art etc.), but today is most often associated by the use of digital technologies. As an artist that has lived and produced work through two technological breakthroughs: the emergence of video as a carrier and recorder of sound and image; secondly the advent of the personal computer; I hold an ambivalent position to claims for ‘the digital’.

Media art is contemporary and temporary and certainly not all the same: there are many differences of background, training and motivation between the protagonists – the artists. They may identify themselves as a media artist, sic artist, technologist, media activist, video artist or none of the above. If this is true of the artists it is even more so for the theorists and writers on media art.

In 2001 Lev Manovich said the digital was a *language*, which is another way of describing media, something between – that communicates. The digital domain should not be viewed as a medium; rather it is a *state* (of information), latent until released through specific apparatus. That we live in a digital age seems obvious (our year is the 58th of the Digital Era, as the term *byte* was coined by Werner Buchholz in July 1956) but it is not necessarily a permanent future, merely a temporary convenience for our tools and technologies that nevertheless exist in an infinite and analogue universe.

Writers and artists have much to share with, and tell us, as this festival and publication will reflect.

Dundee, Scotland. January 2015

Foreword

Media Art? Elements for Reflection

Sandra Lischi
Professor at Università degli Studi di Pisa

It's an age of difficult definitions; terms that neither fully define their concepts, nor fully satisfy their users; names that shift and overlap to form new ones, as Gianni Toti postulated with his *Poetronica*, *sinestronica* and *architronica*. Media and arts intertwine, but also elide one another, as they are standardized by the democratic nature of binary code. Post-media, inter-media, post-cinema... even post video art: the electronic arts seem to be everywhere and nowhere. They are revered and yet nebulous and barely beheld, to use a term loved by Robert Cahen and which even characterises a substantial part of video creation.

On the one hand, there are media shifts and overwrites, concepts devoured by the meta-medium represented by computers (Youngblood); while, on the other, we retrieve and inject new life into debates on specifics details, as if to proclaim the irreducible identity of different media. In France, cinema is at the centre of a theoretic debate that places its ontology in dark halls, in projection, in its unchangeable and uninterrupted temporal nature (Raymond Bellour, Jacques Aumont), but this clashes with any theoretical approach (and artistic practice) that identifies, in cinema, contaminations with contemporary art (exposed cinema), inevitable "expansions," hybrids and mutations in the condition of the spectator. Similarly, videos – were we to follow this approach – are characterised by simultaneity, live feeds (even closed circuit transmissions and the effects created by their immediate control). These are specific characteristics that are beyond the reach of cinema.

And yet, if we exclude the classical phase of cinema (that we now know is a clearly defined phase), even before being born, it was an amalgam of photography and magical lanterns, an improvisation of projection loci, an admired documentation of movements, forms, faces, objects and signs. Historically, avant-garde movements, experimental and underground cinema, have broken screens, modified and multiplied projection surfaces, invented new ways of viewing movies, or spectator experiences - to use a term that is frequently used by critics today studying the mutations of cinema.

And yet, since the 1963 Paik Exhibition at the Wuppertal Parnass Gallery, video immediately revealed its full potential: from embryonic interactivity to versatility with other objects, from unusual visitor experiences to real-time alterations of the audio and video signals.

Media Art. Does this term indicate an art that uses media? Does it indicate one that intersects all of them? Or is it related to technology? Technology, however, was also used by Michelangelo in his choice of paintbrushes and pigments. Indeed, artists must always reckon with any new technology that appears during their lifetime. As Philippe Dubois rightly points out, we should speak of “latest” technology to remove the emphasis of the term “new.” Or do we use the term “media” to refer to the panorama of tools (photography-radio-cinema-television) that have been englobed by computers and that are rooted, as Peppino Ortoleva reminds us, in the nineteenth century? In this case, does the exhibition of Italian Media Artists featured by the Festival - artists who use media in an artistic manner, creating sounds, images, theatrical shows and iconographies - showcase artists who are involved with playback technology, net art, web art (or a web of art or networked art ... The synthesis provided by the English language does not always help us out.)

Years ago, Fabrizio Plessi refused to be labelled a “video-artist.” (Was Michelangelo, he said, a “marble artist”?). Similarly, for many years now, Robert Cahen and other French artists have been using the term “film” for their electronic works. At the opening of the great Parisian exhibition at the *Grand Palais*, in the spring of 2014, Bill Viola never mentioned the word “video.” After all, ever since film – the material - has disappeared from movie theatres, we no longer see *films*. We do, however, still use the term and we do so correctly considering the tradition of narrative feature films viewed in movie theatres.

There was a moment when it was important to distinguish - even from a technological point of view - and specify that “this is on film” or “this is a video.” It may have been a necessary to demand the dignity and artistic nature of electronic forms that were once snubbed by critics, academies and festivals. However, that moment now lies behind us. Today, video-art is both widespread and far-reaching (as well as the object of important accolades, like that of Joan Jonas at the 2015 *Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia* and the 2014 *Hangar Bicocca di Milano*). It now occupies – both secretly and overtly – a wide range of exhibitions, media experiences and films that are inspired by its narrative infractions and visual effects; music videos and animations contaminated by its characteristics and unconcealed nuances of urban video-mapping; museum installations and public spaces, as well as the many spaces that are dedicated to audio-visual experimentation at cinema festivals and art shows.

Thus, our problem is not to investigate Media Art as such, but to inform our vision of this new panorama of images in movement that are no longer either cinema or video, that rediscover pre-cinematographic art, photography and painting and simultaneously look ahead to forms of creative 3D that blend installations and narrations and cinematographic narrations with temporal stations that recall peregrinations through installations. They investigate the use of forms other than

screens and the like (such as Xavier Dolan’s *Mommy*, 2014). The issue (and the reason behind the significance of the Rome Media Art Festival¹) is to understand what youth or newcomers see; create short circuits between these images, their vision and ours; redefine our point of view, identifying in this alarming and fascinating amalgam of signals and stimuli a concept that can be grasped, help us to understand them both logically and sensually (body and mind, science explains, are not at all separate) and find our way through this forest by identifying lights in the distance that may slowly help us, with our undivided attention, to distinguish and fully appreciate them.

1. The Media Art Festival, which is the event for which this essay has been published, will be held on Feb. 25 – March 1, 2015 at the Centrale Montemartini, Università Roma Tre and Città Educativa Roma Capitale (www.mediaartfestival.org).

Introduction

Valentino Catricalà

Researcher at The Fondazione Mondo Digitale and Post-Doc Research Fellow at Università degli Studi Roma Tre

Alfonso Molina

Professor of Technology Strategy at the University of Edinburgh (UK) and Scientific Director of the Fondazione Mondo Digitale

This book has its origin and justification in the event connected to it, the Media Art Festival of Rome. Such an event is one of the first attempts in Italy – and more notably in Rome – at establishing a proper space devoted to the relations between art and technology, in order to grasp the complex phenomenon of Media Art from several perspectives. The Festival presents indeed not only art exhibitions and events, but also masterclasses and lectures held by experts as well as, on the active involvement side, educational activities and dynamic workshops. Promoted by the Fondazione Mondo Digitale, the Festival took place in Rome from the 25th February to the 1st March, 2015, at the Centrale Montemartini, the State University Roma Tre, and at the Città Educativa di Roma Capitale (Educational Town of the Capital of Rome) – where the Fondazione Mondo Digitale is also hosted. The exhibition titled “From Body to Mind. New Generations of Italian Media Artists”, here presented in the second part of the book, is meant to group together for the first time several Italian artists working in the Media Art field.

Such an event is hardly apt to be framed within a unitary form, and could not be associated with a traditionally designed catalogue. A book embracing these phenomena from several viewpoints and combining the traditional “catalogue” form with a research-oriented and essay approach, then, appeared as more appropriate to the context. In our opinion, the very complexity of the Media Art subject requested this solution.

In the first part, several essays have been collected and, in order to encompass all aspects of the concerned phenomenon, three main sections have been devised: *Theories*, *Histories*, and *Perspectives*. As is clear from the headings, the first section would like to provide a theoretical-critical framework to the phenomenon, the second investigates instead its historical – hence, archeological – roots, and the third is a survey on the current relation between the latest art operations and technologies, including the consequent perspectives engendered by such a relation.

The book opens with two forewords by two eminent scholars, **Steve Partridge**

and **Sandra Lischi**. Both forewords briefly outline the innovative and troublesome features of this new discipline.

The *Theories* section of the book opens with an important essay by **Sean Cubitt** and **Paul Thomas**. The essay was previously published in *Relive. Media Art Histories*¹ and it was included in this collection because of its early attempt at systematizing the Media Art phenomenon. The two authors' argument preliminarily provides a full review of all standing theories. Such a review is all the more important today, given the need for a proper context, history and philosophy in such a self-establishing realm as Media Art. Such a discipline, as the two authors argue, questions the concepts of medium specificity and requires a new materialism, combining the humanist culture – history, philosophy, aesthetics, – with scientific subjects, such as engineering, mathematics, and physics.

A different systematic approach may be found in **Oliver Grau**'s essay, which notably emphasizes the social relevance of the phenomenon. According to Grau, indeed, «Media art is the art form that uses the technologies that fundamentally change our societies». However, such a relevance on the social level is not coupled with an equal importance on the institutional level, with the resulting indifference and misunderstanding of institutions and research centres. Misunderstandings are provoked by the peculiar nature of Media arts, which are very far from the traditional logic of the institutions devoted to the preservation of cultural properties.

The Festival and this book aim – within the general philosophy of Fondazione Mondo Digitale – at providing new theoretical foundations in order to cope with the transformations experienced by the world of education in the current digital era. **Alfonso Molina**'s essay argues that the challenge entailed by such a complex world requires a new educational approach to life, within which Media Arts may well play a significant role for the acquisition of crucial skills, such as self-awareness, creativity, and digitalization.

The theoretical overview is completed by an essay by **Catricalà**. Starting from the '50s notion of technique in Heidegger and McLuhan's notion of Medium in the '60s, the essay looks into the conceptual and terminological foundations of the rising phenomenon of Media Arts in the '50s until today. The retrieval of interpretative categories suitably grasping and organizing these phenomena is also attempted.

Media Art *Histories* have been lately abundantly investigated, thanks to a series of homonymous conferences in 2005². Precisely such conferences have brought the importance of the Media Art histories on the foreground. Along this line, the

second section of this book is devoted to *Histories*. **Marco Maria Gazzano**, notably, investigates the historical-theoretical basis of the relation between art and science, and detects in cinema, first, and in media art, afterwards, some great examples of intersection.

Such intersections between art and science pertain also to the relation between sound and image, concerning which Media Arts have greatly contributed to assess implicit issues. Every technology differently receives and reproduces information, as it also affects our understanding of it. Precisely image and sound are the object of concern in **Giulio Latini**'s essay, which presents Robert Cahen's work and the group of Edison Studio's artists as innovative examples in this field. Following these more general essays, some case studies are presented in order to better provide a historical framework to Media Arts. **Laura Leuzzi, Elein Shemilt and Stephen Partridge** thoroughly investigate two all-female case studies concerning Elaine Shemilt's work *Doppelganger*, Federica Marangoni's *The Box of Life*, and Sanja Ivekovic's *Instructions N°1* and *Make up - Make down*.

In parallel, **Valentina Ravaglia** studies the renown Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition, a milestone in these fields. And **Maurizio Marco Tozzi** detects an original front in the history of remote interactive artworks.

While Tozzi's works are delimited by the rising of net art, the section titled *Perspectives* is instead open to the post-internet art by **Domenico Quaranta**. What perspectives mark out this realm of Media Art? What new artistic trends may be found today? These are the questions tackled by this last section. An emerging trend is still interactivity, as **Alessandro Amaducci** argues while investigating one domain half-way between art and commerce, that is interactive music videos. Art is today also affected by transitions and constant influences concerning more commercial spheres, and in this regard interactive music videos are precisely a realm of peculiar interest.

Also in this section, some case studies follow more general essays. **Roc Parés**'s text, for instance, focuses on the Master degree in digital art of the Universidad de Pompeu Fabra, while a bite of the latest trends in sound art is provided by **Elisa Cuciniello**.

At the end of the book, a young Media Art Curator, **Veronica D'Auria**, recapitulates the main lines of this artistic landscape still very hard to contextualize or fully grasp in its complexity.

1. Sean Cubitt, Paul Thomas, *Relieve. Media Art Histories*, Mit Press, Cambridge 2014.

2. www.mediaarthistory.org. The next conference shall be held in Montreal in October 2015.