

# New Media: its Aesthetics and Representation

Dunja Kukovec

melon@mail.ljudmila.org

[**Disclaimer:** aesthetics is ethic, representation is process, criticism is selfreflection.]

**Abstract:** In its first part the following text presents the canvas for reevaluation of author and authorship with certain art history method. To be able to position the author in the demanding frame a certain selfpositioning of the viewer has to be developed. Thus, in the second part of the text I argue the position of the active viewer and co-author.]

The method of historical materialism and viennese art history school [1] is undoubtedly insufficient for exploring and understanding the 20th century art practices; its incompatibility becomes even clearer in attempts to interpret new media art [history] [2]. On the other hand, new media art can easier be reflected with the method that was introduced by non-academic art historians and critics of the society in the late sixties and early seventies. "Their creative, interrogative, and critical scrutiny" [3] which derives from Marxist and feminist studies was mirrored in so called radical art history. [4] Nonetheless, contemporary art often seems better captured and reflected by philosophers, social scientist, culturologists and creative curators. [5] After and still new media art best criticism stays in the typing hands of techno freaks, geeks and society critics that are often directly connected with the media itself. [6]

With emergence of "media is the message" [7] and contemporary [de]structuralism [philosophy after Hegel] certain practical shifts have occurred in the last decade. They processed the need for a change of value system in art history which is urgently demanding for social-, time- and place-based methodology.

## The role of the author

The role of author, his position and its value. The postmodern state of mind which is rooted in contemporary philosophy has abandoned the concept of romantic genius. [8] In art history studies and in wider reflection of today's creative society this is still not properly acknowledged.

New media art is mostly the result of a team work of an artist [the owner of idea/information [9]], a programmer [essential executor] and/or other technically skilled person. On the other hand there are artists that are highly skilled and their expertism allows them besides independency, also the possibility to execute the work by themselves in total. IMHO [10] here lies the essence of a problem concerning evaluation.

The institutional art history was established in the 19th century at the time of romanticism as well as rationalism, when the concept of “individualism and subjectivity was the key to art” [11]. Although romantics were utopically oriented towards unity [e.g. utopian quest for a union with nature] that can also be followed in a networked society [12], they appreciated the artistic genius and scientific hero. The romantic concept of artistic genius continued the renaissance tradition which substituted the former view of art as craft. The art history strategy of outlining the exceptional intellectual abilities i.e. genius seemed optimal operational tool to establish the system of individuals and styles. Art historians at that time easily adapted the same method to previous periods, especially back until renaissance. They didn't mind using the same method in gothic or even in romanesque period although it is almost impossible to talk about artist and names at that time. Instead they applied same method with monks, monuments and places... Finally, they try to operate in the same manner with the 20th century art.

The classical art history never recognised individual or a workshop as a criteria. A workshop was identified with the individual or individual with a workshop, but this has never been positioned as a criteria counterpoint to artists that worked on their own.

What I would like to suggest is a sort of new value system that is not referred to the white male and his geniality. Instead it would emphasize a team work, process and expertism [“everyone is an expert” [13]] where authorship is somehow difused among many actors in it. Suddenly, we loose the one leading author, the hierarchy and the superiority, well rooted in eurocentrism and western white mail history, which is continuously taken for granted. Especially art history enables big caracters and leading positions with the fake trust in one person geniality what at certain point may lead to an artist that is managing to defend its position and uniqueness with transparent strategy.

Another conception that is interrealated with institutonal art history followed in institutional representation centers - galleries and museums. The term “art world” that was clearly articulated in the 1968 acctually enabled strategy and method for inclusion and/or exclusion. Artists could figuratively decide if they want to follow the rules and the trends, in general to be part of it or not.

Some characteristics of this issue are similar to the issue of feminism. The core of it represents the starting point itself that was long pronounced as the women issue, also misinterpreted as the women problem. This is how we are facing the issue of positioning roles, authorships and values. We can firmly say the work is done by certain artist while at the same time we are not bothered that actually the whole painting was done by his pupil. From perspective of defining today new media art production and its dispersed expertism this seems unacceptable.

Many new media creativity belongs to a programmer or some other technical person. Are we still able to consider the work of an artist as purely his work? At that point it is necessary that input should be properly argued. The discourse about the process itself looks like the logical outcome. Thus each part of the work has gained the same unadorned meaning! What I am suggesting is another click in our mind, a reflexion on just passed postmodernism. The method of postmodern relativists and contemporary feminists [14] can easier render misinterpreted history, moral and views of authoritarian approach in terms of artist uniqueness as just one of the repeating failures. Switch the mind and let us understand the popular grand artists weren't so grand finally, whereas the authorship positioning represents just another one in the series of issues regarding proper value system, that should also affect the copyright issue.

We are witnessing just another interesting outcome at recent new media art events - recognising the coding as creative practice and not just as a skill.

Thus the new media art and its authorship is questioned and is placed alongside with questions of identity, body, materiality and ownership - the keys of cybertheory. Art historian's author has been abandoned by avatars that are representing the large part of online art projects. Duchamp, dadaists and conceptual artist obviously weren't destructive enough, although they produced work like: *A Piece That Is Essentially The Same As A Piece Made By Any Of The First Conceptual Artist, Dated Two Years Earlier Than The Original And Signed By Somebody Else*. [15]

It is not destruction but a deconstruction. Deconstruction which would enable us more appropriate attitude in the newly reconstituted system. The system that could easily adapt to "copyleft attitude" [16], or even further to the system of commons. This also leads to de[con]struction of authority but not in deconstruction of individual, his materiality and ideas. "The artist is author. The author is information." [17] But because "information presented at the right time and in the right place can potentially be very powerful" [18], it has to be represented with all that awareness.

The positioning system in digital art history is requesting a change and so is the value system of references and credits. Author is a reference and a credit, not an authority, consistency and integrity, or a genius that can be sold. "With everything is always shifting; consistency is not a virtue but becomes a vice; integration is limitation. Everyone is no one." [19]

But above all "an organism is most efficient when it knows its own internal order", with subversive words: when it acknowledges its [disperesed] standing point.

Do you remember the ideas in the air? [20] To paraphrase Goethe: each work is a work of collective being.

Can the work of collective being stays the property of one person?

### **The role of a viewer**

"What our age needs is communicative intellect. For intellect to be communicative, it must be active, practical, engaged. In a culture of the simulacrum, the site of communicative engagement is electronic media. In the mediatrix, praxis precedes theory, which always arrives too late. The communicative intellect forgets the theory of communicative praxis in order to create a practice of communication." [21]

After this introduction there is a practical and quite usual example of a certain adoptable practice:

"... ninety per cent of the people - would walk in, put their hands behind their back and walk around looking at the computers; they wouldn't even approach them and some just walked out. On the other hand, the younger generation came in and got totally engaged and set-up worked perfectly. People were engaged in two minutes, and were there for hours against convention of the gallery where people are supposed to spend only fifteen minutes and than go to the next space." [22]

According to media-is-a-tool [23] practices and its representation we are often and unfortunately still faced with fascination and sensation of an object, its provocative, engaged, mind-twisting or visionary message, so in those moments we are still putting hands behind our back and mediate. But we are also facing the art works [world] that are [is] not solely standing on its own, but needs interactivity in all its sense.

The term interactivity became a real buzzword in the last couple of years. It

has acquired different meanings according to author or/and situation. In general it “means that the user/audience has the ability to act to influence the flow of events or to modify their form” [24] and interactivity as “creating versus consuming” [25]. After Wilson we can differ them by what kind of interaction is required (choosing, contributing, authoring...) and how intense in terms of time and control the interactivity would be (rigid, flexible, total...).

In figurative historical timeline we could extract following phases of interaction

- exploring [26]
- acting/reacting
- communicating
- adding
- finishing (proposed by Brian Eno [27] in 1996)
- changing the content (proposed by <http://0100101110101101.org> in 2000)
- understanding
- engaging as political subjects

The roots of interactivity are deep and wide-spreaded. In these roots many of the “actions” are actually closer to “interpassivity”, whereby today’s understanding of interactivity means the straight ability to change the content and to co-authorize the work.

In the 1920’ the Dadaists established cabarets and street theater in which audience members were encouraged to participate as creators. The communist upheavals in Russia resulted in the agitprop movement in which workers were expected to become active as artists. Berthold Brecht street theater in the 30’s linked politics, art and participation. In the 1960’s and 70’s the interactive art movement flourished all over the globe in art forms including visual art, theater, dance, music, poetry, and architecture. For example, happenings created free form installation/theater events in which the audience was often absorbed into participation into ongoing events. [28]

On the other hand, the recent activities [that are also shaping communities] present the huge step towards interactivity and “making media” [29]. However, “conversation that is shaped creatively by all its participants can be both a vehicle for cultural change and the social sculpture that results.” Besides “the pleasures of conversation and the erotics of encounter” we can hope for better organisation between individuals, i.e. artists and viewers, who will than be able to take and continue an active role in the society.

Today’s technological creative derivatives don’t present a movement or a group,

their interactive “spirit” can be traced in object based contemporary art works. The level of interactivness varies also in the online works themselves. “What you see is usually not what you get.” [30] There are works that simply need a broader context that can be embraced only with active participation, emancipation and engagement.

All this “interactivness” demands an active viewer. She has to know [or she has to recall the simple Deleuzian-Guattari [31] desire] how to act, react, where to continue and how to conclude. This position is opposed to the passivity and is demanding engaged and active collaborators. Persons that are ready either to educate, read manuals, to be individual, to search for solutions or to be explorative. Many new media art works are presenting a challenge for a better and clearer comprehension of the new media tool itself and its creative possibilities.

For a while we have been talking about the process. Often everyone can take an active part to a final realisation, to a representation and its perfect outcome. This is also where the issue of curating can be introduced. In curating new media art exhibitions the discourse about inability to present net.art in the museum or gallery has been going on for quite a while. [32]

To present it correctly you have to fulfill as many layers as possible: formalistic objectives, content/context relation, intention and engagement. The majority of older net.art projects functions most properly when you click on them by chance. Although this is not an essential characteristic for all of them (eg. the recent art-act project: *Heath Bunting's BorderXing Guide* [33] does not have to be discovered online by chance, the project is based on research, on the contrary it is much better to follow it every time and now to check for “improvements”). However, the early net.art functioned the best when you dropped “there” by chance. At that time it was argued how impossible it is to incorporate concept of chance in a “systematically arranged” exhibition.

The active viewer is thus not only consumer of the art, but an explorative person, collaborator with an open mind attitude, interested in technology, its various use and in the progress itself. It is not for high-tech fascination he would search in the galleries, but a certain subversive use of technology, where technology itself is placed in another context, where its use is diverted.

To decide for technology, when various theoreticians are already claiming there is no more difference between artificial and natural, means to decide for ethic. Actually the ethic is the reason to say yes, to be involved, engaged, capable to read so called “new media art”. It is not about technology, it is about freedom, society and direct democracy. The artist and the viewer are living in the newly defined art world: “a platform to air viewpoints and promote discussions that are not

supported by the mass media and official government. Our choice of “profession” gives us the freedom to say things that others fear to say in public, even if they think the same way or at least are curious to hear another viewpoint. If we are silent or don’t contribute to the public discourse, who will?” [34]

After comes the art history of details. [35]

The *Ars Electronica Prize* 1999 went to Linux OS [36]. This belongs to a curatorial practice of Duchampian “claiming” the [in] art. A sociological phenomenon is proclaimed for a piece of art, that at that very moment gains all its attributes. Linux is above all directly questioning authorship and it is provoking corporatist system of power.

While we look at it from the art history perspective we can think of an architectural project, where many individuals worked, only that in this century they have worked voluntarily. This new media project can be seen as *gesamtkunstwerk* with a slightly different characteristics: it is a tool [media], a content and a message at the same time. Another principle of *gesamtkunstwerk* is Frequency Clock [37], recently released streaming scheduling system, that represents a convergence of media of such an importance, that it can easily slip into the art field.

For ages women are not solely cooks and reproduction machines anymore, why would the viewer be just an observer and a slow passer-by with hands behind his back?

Finally, the ikonology [38] of contemporary works is so multilayered that a viewer has to be at least so interested and detail oriented as the middle age’s pilgrim to be able not to get just an impression but to live the meaning and the power of media-message.

## Notes

1) Established in 1852 by Eitelberger von Edelberg in Vienna.

2) Similar was happening e.g. with conceptualism, Minimal and Pop art in the sixties and seventies, in institutional world that still idealised Clement Greenberg who in turn publicly abhorred Minimal and Pop art.

Lippard, R. Lucy (1997) (ed.), *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object*, p. 30. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

3) Hariss, J. (2001), *The New Art History*. London and New York: Routledge.

4) The main ideas of marxist art criticism and feminism in art history can be found in the texts written by Griselda Pollock, Lucy Lippard, John Berger, T.J. Clark and others.

5) With the emergence of creative curating we got writers for contemporary art like Peter Weibel, Boris Groys and Hans Ulrich Obrist and others.

6) Geert Lovink, Pit Schultz, Joanne Richardson, Francesca da Rimini, Keiko Sei, Steve Deitz and many others.

7) After Marshall McLuhan.

8) Schaffer, S., "Genius in Romantic natural philosophy", in Cunningham, A. and Jardine, N. (1990) (eds.), *Romanticism and the Sciences*, pp. 82-98. For recent thesis on genius and geniality see also texts by Martha Woodmansie.

9) Leopard, R. Lucy (1997) (ed.), *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object*, p. 13. Berkley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

10) Hackers dictionary: in my humble opinion, [www.jargon.org](http://www.jargon.org)

11) Coyne, R. (1999), *Technoromanticism*, p.6. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

12) *ibid.*

13) Florian Schneider paraphrasing Fluxus statement: Everyone is an artist!, <http://make-world.org>

14) Like Donna Haraway e.g.

15) Eduardo Costa, 1970. Eduardo Costa's work is beside authorship also criticising the quest for unreachable time - the notion of speed and time means succes and money .

16) For more information see <http://www.gnu.org> and <http://artlibre.org/licence.php/lalgb.html>

17) Luka Princic, artist, musician and programmer, 2002.

18) Hans Hacke in Lippard, R. Lucy (1997) (ed.), *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object*, p. 13. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

19) Taylor, Mark C., Saarinen E., (1994), *Imagologies*, London and New York: Routledge.

20) Like Goethe in 1832: "What am I? What have I accomplished? My work is the work of a collective being who bears the name of Goethe." in literature of Woodmansee, Martha (2001), *Collectivities in History*. The same problem Lucy Lippard is also arguing in Lippard, R. Lucy (1997) (ed.), *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object*, p. 10. Berkley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

21) Taylor, Mark C., Saarinen, E., (1994), *Imagologies*, London and New York: Routledge.

22) Tamas Banovich in Cook, S., Graham, B., Martin, S. (eds.), (2002), *Curating New Media*, Great Britain: Baltic.

23) Kim Cascone, 1998.

24) Wilson, Stephen, (1993), "The Aesthetics and Practice of Designing Interactive Computer Events", <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~swilson/>

25) *ibid.*

26) "For example, the reader of a novel or the viewer of a movie is constantly



adjusting attention, internal references, identifications, emotional responses, and willingness to engage internal associations that come from personal experience, social/ ethnic/ gender positions, previous experience with the art form, etc. Some analysts would go so far as to claim there is no successful art or media without this level of engagement interactivity.”, *ibid*.

27) Eno, B., (1996), *A Year of Swollen Appendices: A Diary of Brian Eno*, London: Faber and Faber.

28) The whole paragraph is summarized after Stephen Wilson. Wilson, S., (1993), “The Aesthetics and Practice of Designing Interactive Computer Events”, <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~swilson/>

29) Richard Barbrook, 2002.

30) Paraphrasing Lala Rascic, 2002.

31) Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix: *Anti-Oedipus*, (1972), reprinted (2000), London, The Athlone Press.

32) Thus I find highly important that museums are commissioning the web art works. It is one of the best ways how to support and acknowledge net.art.

33) <http://www.tate.org.uk/netart/borderxingguide.htm>

34) Tamiko Thiel, 2002.

35) For exclusive reading on new media art history language read Lev Manovich.

36) Linux, operating system, more informations on <http://www.linux.org/>. About *Ars Electronica Prize* see <http://prixars.aec.at/history/>

37) Initiators Adam Hyde and Honor Harger, more informations on <http://www.frequencyclock.net/>

38) After Erwin Panofsky.

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