

Spectator, Participant or Dupe?: (Re-)imagining the Audience through New Media and its Arts

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss two competing sets of claims about new media art practice. The first set celebrates and champions the new aesthetic possibilities afforded by digital technologies and argues that these enable new and 'liberatory' modes of spectatorship based on play, performance and participation. The second suggests that far from emancipating the spectator, new media art devalues genuine social interaction through an illusory participation in trivialised interactions. I conclude by suggesting that, given the increasing socio-cultural significance of new media technologies, a dialectical synthesis of these positions is both desirable and possible.

Keywords

New media, interaction, modes of spectatorship

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper I discuss a number of issues and debates arising from new media arts practice and theory. Broadly speaking, my purpose is to reconsider and problematise notions of interaction and interactivity, as these are deployed in contemporary critical discourse. My methodology is straightforward. I introduce and critically investigate two opposing sets of claims about new media art's relationship with its audience. Adherents of the first set see new media art as both a novel form of creative practice and a radical form of communication. By transforming spectators into participants, they argue, new technologies reconfigure the traditional nexus of relationships that connect artists, audiences and artworks. Supporters of the second set, on the other hand, contend that far from emancipating the spectator – to use Jacques Rancière's terminology [1] – new media art devalues genuine social interaction whilst, at one and the same time, reproducing and veiling the technological and commercial colonisation of everyday life. That is, a particular technological and commercial ideology is built upon the 'illusion of participation'. I go on to argue, however, that there is much of value in each position, and that rather seeing them as an irreconcilable binary pair, a more useful approach is to seek a dialectical synthesis of them. By drawing on Walter Benjamin's depiction of the new media of his time as simultaneously a "poison and a cure" [2], I conclude by sketching the contours of such a synthesis.

2 THE AUDIENCE IMAGINED AND RE-IMAGINED

Arguably, every media imagines its audience. That is, each media has a model of the conditions in which it will be experienced, the subjects who will experience it, and the nature of the experience itself. Some examples: television used to imagine the domestic sloth – the couch potato – and the privatized nuclear family primed for consumption; painting imagines groups of individual viewers moving along orthogonal threads that radiate out from the work; sculpture extrudes the image and imagines—instead of radiating vectors—arcs, spirals and helixes that envelope

the work; cinema imagines a phalanx of undifferentiated, silent and immobile spectators; a captive audience if you like.

Seen in this light we might fruitfully reconsider previous aesthetic revolutions as attempts to 're-imagine' their audience, as much as rethink the form, content or nature of the artwork. For example: Marcel Duchamp's readymades challenged the audience to rethink the very nature of the artwork and the gallery experience [3]; Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage imagined an ideologically armed audience literally moved to action [4]; Berthold Brecht's epic theatre replaced Aristotelean tenets of empathic and emotionally involved audience, with the idea of a detached, intellectually involved one, as well as breaking down rigid distinctions between audience, performer and stage [5].

With these ideas in mind – ideas of imagined and re-imagined audiences – I want to look briefly at two recent new media art works that explicitly re-imagine their audience, and do so in ways that reflect, exemplify even, an important intellectual and aesthetic trend within contemporary new media art. Put simply this trend suggests that emerging forms of interactive media afford radically new possibilities for what we might call 'audience-centred aesthetics'.

The first is Rafael Lozano Hemmer's 2005 piece 'Under Scan' (see figure 1). 'Under Scan' was billed as the world's largest video art installation and makes use of the world's brightest projector and extremely sophisticated motion tracking and sensor software. Briefly, Under Scan invites users to explore what are often vast outdoor spaces – the Rotunda at UK's University of Lincoln, London's Trafalgar Square to name but two – searching for hidden video biographies of local residents. Random life-stories appear when the user's shadow is cast at certain locations and embodied subjects and virtual representations interact with each other. The second is Mary Flannagan's 2002 piece, 'Giant Joystick' (see figure 2). This work consists of a giant version of a 1970's video game console. The piece enables groups of people to collaborate playing massive emulations



Figure 1: 'Under Scan' (Venice Biennale version)
by Rafael Lozano Hemmer
(courtesy of the artist)

of early Atari videogames. Some components such as the giant joystick itself are so large that they can only be operated if members of the audience cooperate.

So, what might we say about these works? For one thing they clearly integrate technological sophistication, conceptual clarity and experiential aesthetics. They work, in every sense of the word. For another, they paint a clear picture of a re-imagined new media art audience: an audience that actively participates in the creation of the work; an audience that performs the work (or better still, improvises the work); an audience that plays with and through the work; an audience that – to all intents and purposes – becomes the work, is the work.



Figure 2: 'Giant Joystick' by Mary Flannagan
(courtesy of the artist)

3 SPECTATOR, PARTICIPANT OR DUPE?

The British media artist and theorist Andy Cameron, argues that work of this kind represents a novel and radical development in media art practice. Its significance,

according to Cameron, is: that it sets up new relationships between artist, audience and work; that it affords new forms of semiosis; that it opens up new aesthetic possibilities. More specifically, Cameron contends that:

[non-interactive media] involve a linear progression with a clearly defined separation between the sender of the message – the author – and the receiver of the message – the audience. The form of the message is broadly that of a proposition or statement – the author tells the audience something about the world [...] Interactive media, by contrast, involves a blurring of the line between author and audience, in which the audience, to a certain extent, participates in the creation of the message itself [6].

Above all, Cameron claims that mediated interactivity – of the kind that we saw in Hemmer's and Flannagan's work – is both radical and novel because of how it re-imagines the audience as 'players, performers, participants'; as active co-creators rather than passive, mystified and interpellated 'receivers'. Is he correct?

On the one hand, it is relatively easy to deny both novelty and radicalism by recalling previous new media art works that also explicitly re-imagine their audience in ways similar to those proposed by Cameron. Let's do it by decade: 1970's: NAM June Paik's 'Participation TV' which invited its audience to transform abstract TV imagery by vocalizing into attached microphones; 1980's: Fred Forest's 'Kunstland' (art land) which set up a network of telephonic and display devices and invited improvised communication and interaction; 1990's: Paul Sermon's 'Telematic Dreaming' which projected images of people from a remote location onto a bed at another, enabling users to interact with simulations of distal others.

Each of these pieces exploited the technological affordances of the emerging media of their day to set up complex and dialogic interactions between audience and work, and significantly, between audience members mediated by the work. What is more, we could equally recall low-tech conceptual artworks that also live off the creativity of the audience in ways that are analogous to the technologically complex examples discussed above. Yaacov Agam's interactive paintings, Mel Bochner's conceptual installations, and FLUXUS 'happenings', to name three of the more obvious candidates.

One might also challenge Cameron's characterization of the traditional media audience as the passive receivers of messages cast – both in the sense of formed as well as sent – by the artist/creator. Roland Barthes' seminal essay 'Death of the Author', for example, empowered the reader and became a rallying cry for a broad range of theoretical approaches directed towards redistributing the currency of aesthetic experience in favour of the user [7]. As Terry Eagleton succinctly puts it, "We have come to understand that one of the producers [of texts] is the reader, viewer or listener—that the recipient of a work of art is a co-creator of it, without whom it would not exist [8]."

Seen in this light, all works of art – or for that matter, all components of material and immaterial culture – are not only interactive – in a very deep sense of the word – but are also co-created in ways that are inimical to linear models of communication.

Yet, on the other hand, when one encounters work like Hemmer's, Flannagan's or indeed, Cameron's own, it is also clear that something distinctive and at times remarkable, is at work, or perhaps better put, 'at play'. But how are we to make sense of it?

One way to explore the significance of work of this kind is to forgo explanations based on radical disjunctures and discontinuities, to eschew arguments about novelty and difference, and to search instead for conjunctures and continuities. Here, I plan to do this in two ways. Firstly, by locating this technologically complex interactive work – let's call it contemporary interactive new media art or CINMA, for convenience – in relation to three vectors, the aesthetic, the technological and the socio-cultural. And then secondly, by exploring these as they coalesce in and around contemporary new media art practice. Let's look at each of these vectors in turn, whilst bearing in mind that in reality of course they are deeply intertwined, interpenetrating and form an irreducible totality.

Aesthetic vectors: CINMA carries forward some of the central concerns of conceptual art, for example: the immateriality of the art object; questions of intentionality; setting up situations to be completed by the audience; the openness of the text and the active role of the audience in making meaning. However, CINMA's ideology of the audience asks even more of them, and in this sense it is possible to see this work refracted through Nicholas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics.

As the theorist Ana Deuze puts it, a relational artistic practice starts with, "[...] human relations and their social context, as opposed to autonomous and exclusive art [9]." Or as Bourriaud himself says, relational aesthetics has to be. "[...] an aesthetic theory consisting of judging artworks in terms of the inter-human relations which they show, produce or give rise to [10]." Relational aesthetics is predicated on the three p's that drive Cameron's theoretical position and animate much new media art practice: 'participation, performance and play'. It celebrates work that is unstable, drives and feeds off dialogue and exchange. It consciously locates artistic practice within everyday life whilst at the same time seeking to draw attention to the non-obviousness of the quotidian.

Now interestingly, Cameron explicitly deploys Bourriaud's theory both to animate his own practice and to justify that of other new media artists. Bourriaud himself, however, is deeply sceptical of new media art and tends to exclude it from his pantheon of relational artists. It is useful to consider why this is the case [11].

Bourriaud argues that new media art is compromised by its relationship to dominant modes of communication and technology. These are by their nature ideological in that they embody and promote particular modes of social interaction that are synchronised with the various rhythms and textures of a hyper-commercialised everyday life. New media art, Bourriaud argues, cannot escape this and despite its best intentions serves to obscure and inhibit dialogue, interaction and participation that occurs outside circuits of exchange. Bourriaud goes even further, arguing that non-technological relational art is a far more powerful way to critique the technologised commercialisation of lived experience.

Technological vectors: earlier generations of computer artists worked with – or perhaps against – technologies that were opaque, inaccessible and intransigent; belligerent even. If you want to get a sense of what this was like, or to remind yourself if you are my age of just how bizarre computation used to be, track down Lev Manovich's wonderful description of learning to program without a computer [12].

Nowadays, transparent, ubiquitous and user-friendly computational tools are a given. Moreover, these are

increasingly found outside the orbit of the software giants and exist within, what Richard Barbrook has christened the Hi-tech Gift Economy [13]. 'Processing' and 'Wiring', for example, provide sophisticated media creation and orchestration tools all for free. They are made by artists and designed for artists. What is more, as Open Source environments, they constitute the core of an evolving community of practice and appear to be nurturing a new generation of artist-technologists [14]. Whether they are able to bridge the yawning chasm that opened up between the conceptual art and art and technology movements in the 1970's (and lives on, perhaps, through Bourriaud's critique of new media art) remains to be seen [15].

What is clear is that certain themes and issues are emerging that – despite Bourriaud's reticence – new media art appears ideally placed to engage: the proliferation of information and abstraction; the connectedness of things; the mediatisation of the material world; new forms of sociability.

Socio-cultural vectors: the division between aesthetic media and everyday life has all but dissolved. New media are deeply embedded in the social reality of contemporary urban life. we use them, wear them, carry them, encounter them on a daily, perhaps hourly, basis. They constitute a symbolic as well as pragmatic tissue that connects art, design, media, consumption and everyday social practice. New media art is as likely to appear on a mobile telephone as in a gallery and might share time and space with a range of other non-artistic – though definitely aesthetic – experiences.

Moreover, the ideas of participation, performance and play, chime with – or arguably derive from – a signal trend in contemporary socio-cultural practice. Bourriaud, for example, develops a situationist theme and talks of the society of extras; a society which extends Andy Warhol's dictum that we will all be 'famous for fifteen minutes', to a lifetime of moments of quasi-fame. Foucault, calls this the reign of the "infamous man" [16]. And these ideas are clearly present in ever more complex media events such as Thailand's 'reality TV show Academy Fantasia, as well as in countless less ambitious experiences that, at one and the same time, colonise everyday life with technology and the commodity, and blur the distinctions between art, design and commerce, between performing and purchasing.

4 A POISON AND A CURE?

Clearly, CINMA is shot through with all manner of contradictions. Whilst it is possible to view the playful, participatory and performative audience as resisting the relentless commercialization of everyday life, it is equally possible to see it as a symptom of a dumbed-down, pathologically throwaway, commodified culture. And, whilst it is eminently possible to discern progressive aesthetic, socio-cultural and political ideas moving through work of this kind, it is equally possible to view it as fetishising the technology it uses – or uses it? – and through this promoting the technological and commercial colonisation of everyday life.

How are we to make sense of these dichotomous interpretations? For my part, I think it is important to view this issue dialectically. That is, rather than buying into one position or the other, to seek their radical synthesis; to tease out what is valuable and true in each and think through what a critical marriage between them might mean.

It is true that new media art finds itself playing with

technologies, ideas and approaches that have their equivalents in the mass media and the ever more pervasive commercial practices of advertising and promotion and the increasingly associated fields of surveillance and consumer profiling. But is it, as Bourriaud suggests fatally compromised by this? I don't think so. As Marx reminds us in *Grundrisse*, the meanings and uses of technologies are never uncontested but are rather sites of struggle between contending interests [17]. The work of new media artists can be fruitfully seen as part of that contest. As Richard Barbrook notes, artists, digital artisans and others have through, "their do-it-yourself attitude [...] successfully transformed the machines of war fighting and money making into the tools of sociability and self-expression [18]." These days, artists are not simply passive 'users' of technologies, but its creators. It is also true, as Bourriaud argues, that new technologies impinge upon existing forms and modes of conviviality and social interaction, and various negative takes on this are possible. Yet equally, other readings are possible and, once again, technologically literate artists are well placed both to critique insipid forms of social interaction and find ways to make creative use of the new spatially liberated forms of cooperation and participation afforded by digital and networked technologies.

For artists working in this field the challenge then is to work with and through these contradictions. One intellectual precedent that might be of value is Walter Benjamin's thinking about new forms of cultural production in the early twentieth century [19]. For Benjamin, it was as big a mistake to underestimate the cinema and other arts of mechanical reproduction, as it was to overestimate them. They were, at one and the same time, a 'poison and a cure'. On the one hand, they reflected and drove particular forms of alienation. On the other they held out the best possibility for the critique of this alienation and, through this, a deeper understanding of an emerging social consciousness. For practitioners and theorists alike, the challenge is, perhaps, to follow Benjamin's lead; to continue to explore and extend the aesthetic and social possibilities of new media whilst sharpening a critique of the technologisation of everyday life, the construction of a capitalism of technological intimacy and the relentless extension of the society of extras.

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