

Post-Media Conditioning

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Introduction

Throughout the last decade one could witness a significant transformation of the institutions and practices associated with 'new media art', which amounts to a crisis that showed itself in the closure of numerous important festivals and institutions. While the 1990's, especially the period leading up to the dotcom bubble, had been a time of hope for artists, curators and theorists working in this field and plenty of public and private funding streams left visible traces in academia, festivals as well as dedicated institutions, this process seems to have been reversed after the turn of the century. At present the 'new media' tag is used by fewer and fewer artists and theorists, in a broader sense it has become unfashionable. On the one hand, new-media became a key factor in the rise of the creative industries sector, on the other hand, the inclusion of artistic positions operating within its sphere into the wider art-world as well as the market has not really taken place. Curators and theorists have thus begun to discuss the current state of affairs and described the characteristics of the present situation as a 'post-media condition'. However the notion 'post-media' has a slightly longer tradition and when it was first introduced in the 1970s it stood for a slightly different meaning. In the following short text I will engage with some of these divergent readings of "post-media" in order to gain a better understanding of how certain underlying hopes and desires that were bound up with the interaction between fine art and the rapidly developing field of digital media present themselves in the current situation.

Post-media as potential emancipation from the power of mass media

Initially the term itself appeared in the landscape of theory with Félix Guattari call for a "post media revolution to come"¹ as a form of re-appropriation of media from the dominance of mass-media channels. He was convinced that autonomous and decentralised groups, such as the ones he came in contact with in the free radio experiments of the 1970s (Radio Alice), could provide an emancipative force leading to "a revolution in intelligence, sensitivity and creativity"² through the generation of new modes of singularized subjectivities. Present day critics of these claims, such as for example Richard Barbrook³ as

well as the French tiquun collective with their notion of “cybernetic capitalism”⁴ criticize this position as a naïve assumption. While Barbrook dismisses it as a poetic return of 68 fantasies to be realised in digital form that came awfully close to the capitalist culture of neoliberal californian technopriests, tiquun point out that within a cybernetic system, every enunciation is already deeply enmeshed with the measures of control that defuse it, simply because it is part of the information feedback loop of communication the system is designed to cope with right from the start. On the one hand the “collective assemblages of enunciation that absorb or traverse specialities”⁵ as Guattari put it, have indeed become the core business mechanism for present day media companies such as facebook, on the other hand, phenomena like ‘Anonymous’ or ‘Wikileaks’ have also appeared on the stage. Tiquun claim that, “whereas the rise of control at the end of the 19th century took place by way of a dissolution of personalized bonds - which gave rise to people talking about ‘the disappearance of communities’ - in cybernetic capitalism it takes place by way of a new soldering of social bonds entirely permeated by the imperative of self-piloting and of piloting others in the service of social unity: it is the device-future of mankind as citizens of the Empire”⁶. To return some credit to Deleuze and Guattari, around 1980 in *Mille Plateaux* they already conceded that, “it could also be said that a small amount of subjectification took us away from machinic enslavement, but a large amount brings us back to it.”⁷ In any case, many of the hopes for political emancipation on the basis of new de-centralised media practice, which were at the heart of artistic engagement in the field of new media art, have been thwarted by the political and economical realities, be it Chinese Internet censorship or the growth of surveillance functions with social media platforms.

(New)media art – media specificity and self reflexion

While Guattari’s notion of a “post-media era”⁸ was characterised by the potential for political emancipation, the art theorist Rosalind Krauss who described the “post-medium condition” in her book “Voyage on the North Sea”⁹ aimed for an emancipation from the logic of medium specificity. Here, ‘post-medium’ stood for the revocation of the modernist principle of a positivist medium specificity striving for purity, as it was put forward by Clement Greenberg. Taking the work of Marcel Broodthaers as an example, Krauss attempts to address how artists increasingly mobilised works in the interstices between but also on the very inside of media conventions in order to get a grip on idiosyncratic artistic positions which fall outside the spectrum of a positivist purifying approach to artistic media. She

writes, “first, (...) the specificity of mediums, even modernist ones, must be understood as differential, self differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support. ‘Singleness’ as Broodthaers says, ‘condemns the mind to monomania’. Second (...) it is precisely the onset of higher orders of technology, ‘robot, computer’ – which allows us, by rendering old techniques outmoded, to grasp the inner complexity of the mediums those techniques support.”¹⁰ In her recent writings she even went one step further by introducing the term “technical support”¹¹ in order to grasp the explosion of diverse aesthetic approaches to art making that have deliberately stepped outside media-related classification. How does this observation relate to the world of ‘new media art’ where the attempt to establish new forms of media within the regime of art and to explore and experiment with their underlying specific conditions was clearly a major driving force?

Post-media – from lakes to the ocean

Very recently Domenico Quaranta has delivered a very insightful attempt to clarify what is at stake for new media art from “the postmedia perspective”¹² as his 2011 Rhizome article was entitled. In this text he delivers a solid introduction into the genealogy of the concept, gives examples of artists and engages at length with Peter Weibel’s and Lev Manovich’s takes on the matter. Peter Weibel, who curated a show entitled “the post media condition” in 2005 writes, “the art of the technical media, i.e. art which has been produced with the aid of a device, constitutes the core of our media experience. This media experience has become the norm for all aesthetic experience. Hence in art there is no longer anything beyond the media. No-one can escape from the media.”¹³ Weibel argues that due to this situation a new all encompassing and unified media sphere has emerged that should be referred to as ‘the post-media condition’. It has emerged with digital technologies and is characterised by a vertical arrangement of innumerable different types of media, without a single dominant one, as well as the increasing emancipation of the observer, visitor or user. Lev Manovich takes the end of medium specificity in the digital realm into a slightly different direction¹⁴ when he attempts to describe the historical development of this condition across three phases: Firstly, the emergence of new artistic strategies of intermedia work by the avantgardes of the last century; Secondly the introduction of Film, Photography and Video as media systems reflecting back on traditional mediatic forms; and, thirdly, the advent of the digital, leading to processual open ended structures and versioning. Domenico Quaranta concludes that “a

set of vertical barriers (between media and different distribution circuits) is replaced by a horizontal divider. Art and media can use the same means, be identical in formal terms and travel on the same distribution circuits, because it is their deep-seated nature that distinguishes them, not incidental elements. From this perspective, independently of the medium it uses to express itself, the art that is most aware of the cultural, social and political consequences of the new media is in line for a position of key importance and unexpectedly reacquires a social function: to combat the flattening of culture with complexity, numbness with sensation and standardization with critical thought.”¹⁵ Here, although I agree with most of this observation, I would pose the question whether the “deep seated nature” that Quaranta claims to distinguish art from other cultural forms doesn’t lead us back into a kind of essentialist mystification. I am convinced that it is not necessary to re-introduce any idea of hidden nature in order to describe the demarcation of art. Instead it seems a lot more promising to consider Jacques Rancière’s writing: “In situ art practices, displacements of film towards spatialized forms of museum installations, contemporary forms of spatialising music, and current theatre and dance practices,- all these things head in the same direction, towards a despecification of the instruments, materials and apparatuses specific to different arts, a convergence on a same idea and practice of art as a way of occupying place where relations between bodies, images spaces and times are redistributed. The very expression ‘contemporary art’ testifies to this.”¹⁶ And he makes a crucial point regarding the structures that enable a distinction between the artistic and the non-artistic when he states that “‘art’ is not the common concept that unifies the different arts. – What the term ‘art’ designates in its singularity is the framing of a space of presentation by which things of art are identified as such. And what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience”¹⁷. It follows that what has become more complex and entered a different stage or condition, is precisely not the interrelationship of different media systems with their respective rules and discourses, but the proliferation of different frames of space-time dedicated to the experience of art. Thus, as Weibel and Manovich rightly claim, changes in distribution and in its wake the participation of audiences should be our focus if we want to get a better understanding of what is at stake. Just as the rise of the Internet has chimed in a tooth and nails war over the control of distribution channels in the music industry between entertainment companies, artists and consumers – the artworld has its equivalent: Long running battles over who holds power over the “distribution of the sensible”¹⁸ as Rancière would put it. At present, under the guise of what I would call ‘post-

media conditioning', the institutions of the traditional art world, powered by a growing market, with massive warships like the biennials and their institutional warlords, the curators – would have us believe that the equivalence of media in the post-media condition amounts to an open market, where we need not attempt to contest the distribution rights any longer, give up the hopes and aspirations of new media activists and artists and merge with the traditional forces of art, the one art world. While I am convinced that the often self-inflicted ghettoisation needs to be overcome, I would like to point out that at the heart of making art in the last two hundred years, there always remained the question how a practice that is perceived outside and unworthy on one day, can alter the aesthetic regime and reshape the constellation once more on the next. What kind of problems does this pose for those whose work is switching between material and immaterial aspects, between manifestation and version, between collaboration and appropriation, simultaneously embracing the countless channels that have opened up? Since answers to these important questions cannot be satisfyingly answered in this text due to its limited scope, I would just like to mention two positions who highlight these issues very briefly. One such example is the artist Artie Vierkant who writes in his manifesto like text "The Image Object Post-Internet" (2010) that he distributes as a pdf from his website: "the work of art lies equally in the version of an object one would encounter at a gallery or museum and the images and other representations disseminated through the Internet and print-publications"¹⁹. Another great example that makes the transformation of audiences visible is the recent rise of street art that essentially depends on the dispersed powers of dissemination of individual fans who take photos and circulate them on the Internet. Without this army of photographers and publishers phenomena like the graffiti artist Banksy would not be able to break through the information barrier to such an extent.

Conclusion

I have tried to trace how the aesthetical and political reading of the notion of 'post-media' has shifted from a potential force for emancipation through the development of new subjectivities, towards a seemingly egalitarian situation in relation to media specificity as a result of the transformations brought about by digital technology. This development shadows many of the sociopolitical changes brought about by post-industrial capitalism. The claim that within a 'post-media condition' all media practice can be considered equal in relation to the art system, reverberates quite strongly with free market ideologies. For this

reason it seems even more necessary to focus on the specific and individual reasons of an artist's choice of medium as well as the question which audience engages with it in which way. Major issues here are quite obviously the current legal battles surrounding intellectual property rights. In any case, the discourse surrounding post-media allows to move beyond the misunderstanding of media as mere technical support system, in order to keep a keen eye on the appearance of novel frames of reference in Jaques Rancière's sense, within the intricate web of contemporary media.

¹ Guattari, Félix (1996) *Soft Subversions*, Sylvère Lotringer ed., David L. Sweet and Chet Weiner trans. Semiotext(e): New York, p. 106.

² Guattari, Félix (1992) "Regimes, Pathways, Subjects." in *Incorporations* Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds). New York: Urzone, p. 30.

³ Barbrook, Richard (2007) „The holy Fools (Long Mix)“, Available: <http://www.imaginaryfutures.net/2007/04/13/the-holy-fools-long-mix-by-richard-barbrook/> (Accessed: 12.05.2012).

⁴ tiquun (2001) „The Cybernetic Hypothesis“, Available: <http://cybernet.jottit.com/> (Accessed: 12.05.2012).

⁵ Guattari, Félix (1996) *Soft Subversions*, Sylvère Lotringer ed., David L. Sweet and Chet Weiner trans. Semiotext(e): New York, p. 75.

⁶ tiquun (2001) „The Cybernetic Hypothesis“, chapter IV, Available: http://cybernet.jottit.com/chapter_4 (Accessed: 12.05.2012).

⁷ Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Félix (2004) Continuum Press: London, New York, p. 506.

⁸ Guattari, Félix (1990) „Towards a Post-Media Era“ trans. Alya Sebt, Clemens, Available: <http://www.postmedialab.org/towards-a-post-media-era> (Accessed: 12.05.2012).

⁹ Krauss, Rosalind (1999) *A Voyage on the North Sea: Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson: New York.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 53.

¹¹ Krauss, Rosalind (2006) „Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition“, October, Spring 2006, No. 116, pp: 55-62.

¹² Quaranta, Domenico (2011) *The Post-Media Perspective*, rhizome, Available: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/jan/12/the-postmedia-perspective/> (Accessed: 12.05.2012).

¹³ Weibel, Peter (2006) „The Post-media Condition“, in AAVV, *Postmedia Condition*, cat., Centro Cultural Conde Duque: Madrid, p. 98.

¹⁴ Manovich, Lev (1999) *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press: Boston, Mass.

¹⁵ Quaranta, Domenico (2011) *The Post-Media Perspective*, rhizome, p.9, Available: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/jan/12/the-postmedia-perspective/> (Accessed: 12.05.2012).

¹⁶ Rancière, Jacques (2009) *Aesthetics and its discontents*, Polity Press: Cambridge, p. 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.: p. 23.

¹⁸ Rancière, Jacques (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum Books: New York, p. 11.

¹⁹ Vierkant, Artie (2010) „The Image Object Post Internet“, Available: <http://jstchillin.org/artie/vierkant.html> (Accessed 12.05.2012).