



New and Novelty in Contemporary Media Cultures

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Abstract: The author is pointing out strategies of artistic-aesthetic and more widely applicable creative practices, which she thinks can be used as interesting examples of critical interventions into contemporary media landscapes. To introduce this topic, she is briefly highlighting a few aspects of the present situation – with some reference to the past – and follows this with a discussion of aesthetic strategies in radical arts.

When we discuss new and novel media developments, confusion naturally arises in the debate because media are new to contemporary cultures by definition. The wording ‘new media’ may indicate an evolutionary perspective which spans, for example, from the analogue such as photography and film, to the more recent digital that emerges with the incorporation of digital computers. Nevertheless, in some instances it may be useful to more closely distinguish historical developments of initially distinct media such as film, performance, music and so on from their recent mergers that produce ‘new’ and ‘different’ media forms, for instance audiovisual media, electronic film, digital film and photography, to name the most prominent appearances of novelty in contemporaneity. In this respect, it will also be necessary to highlight evolutionary steps in the progress of technologies because the novelty does not arrive out of the blue. But it is building up from a variety of interrelated, parallel and also unconnected technical developments that become the building blocks for the arrival of a ‘new’ medium that progresses dynamically and not statically. Thereby, newness and novelty become shifting categories by themselves, and can serve to conceptualize recent and contemporary media phenomena in relation to previous media forms.

With the advent of digital technologies there is less interest in discussing the novelty as such, but it is more important to identify how emerging technologies are incorporated into the already existing media setting. With the digital and the

extended possibilities to merge and fuse all kinds of technologies and aesthetic concepts, it is now more interesting to regard practices of reworking and remediation of previously conceived media forms in the computers and their networks. The picture of newness has dramatically enlarged with the technical connections that produce globally networked communication and provoke questions of inter- and transcultural influences and convergences. In result, the preoccupation for research into new tendencies has changed the focus from identifying media specific developments to considering as equally important the scrutiny of cultural factors and in particular differences between the West and the East.

In the following, I will outline contemporary tendencies in these complex media cultures with the focus on transgressions and crossings of media borders. This will involve questions of the media and cultural contexts with regard to artists' practices of expanding and exhausting the media technologies of their time. In particular, I look at the time span from the seventies to the present when experiments between arts, science and technology were conceived and carried out in a spirit of exploration and examination of properties that film, video and early computers have in common or not. One target of experimentation is to understand what these media conceptually or technically share and how they are otherwise related to each other. Another aim is to identify their structural differences and present the characteristics of each medium by driving it to its limits. In this respect, I discuss strategies of artistic-aesthetic and more widely applicable creative practices, which I think can be used as interesting examples of critical interventions into contemporary media landscapes. To introduce this topic, let me highlight a few aspects of the present situation – with some reference to the past – and follow this with a discussion of artists' practices.

First of all, I consider artists' practices as aesthetic interventions where the target is to unveil or reveal, and make us think about processes in the media that we usually take for granted and only question when there is failure and malfunction. In contrast to these failures, aesthetic interventions can be effective instruments in a critical discourse about dominant media cultures, where the arts dissolve and disrupt and rearrange meaningful contexts of normative media presentations. The aesthetic means can be subtle, ironic or violent, and they can forcefully dismantle the raw materials of our highly mediated environments. Second, among present creative practices, I feel two important criteria stand out: one is the crossover of different cultural and media elements in dialogical contexts; the other is the interaction of different views, attitudes and realities in open-ended processes wherein we experience variety and diversity beyond and

across the dominant modes of homogenizing difference. I will return to these criteria later.

Looking generally at the present situation, it is widely agreed that we have reached a level of mediation that has entered many – maybe too many – areas of our daily lives and activities, so much so that it might sound odd or outdated to seek for a critical position in the arts. Innovation and experiment in the western context is traditionally placed within the history of European avant-garde movements which predicted a technological future, but nowadays technology is available to everyone almost from childhood. We have reached a level of technological application, available to teenagers in their bedrooms, where production, distribution and consumption seem to fuse. Further, we have developed technical tools for the re-mediation of all previous media arts which we can present almost globally. As media critic Marshall McLuhan predicted decades ago, media technologies now seem to have become the natural prosthesis of humans and prolong our bodily and sensorial perception, from the real to the virtual.

Today, most of us are happy to employ these novel technologies, devices and gadgets without much reflection. We do not (usually) refuse to carry all kinds of mini computers around all day long, we do not protest (much) about the talking machines and all the noisy sounds and images that we encounter in almost every public space and place. They come to us without choice or request: we cannot control or stop them in the same way that we can switch off a television. At the same time, we take advantage of all sorts of new applications that demand our ability to constantly adapt to ever-increasingly complex and interconnected operations, while the amount of time and space available to us proportionally decreases. Mobility, flexibility, immediate and permanent accessibility and contactability around the clock are the main characteristics of a situation that extends across the globe, and is greeted by some of us with deep relief, while others suffer from exhaustion.

This state of affairs is also characterized by contradiction. On the one hand, complex technology has become a smart part of quotidian life, while on the other, large sections of our society struggle to cope with the demands of science and technology which force us to adjust constantly to the growing capacity of networked communication. Computers were introduced to enhance humankind's intellectual capacity; now it's the other way round and we need to catch up with the machines. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that the imbalance between the happy few inside, who have hands on, access to, and eventual control of these new technologies, and the many outside, who are excluded and represent the

other, is growing. Dataspace, for example, is not an open or free territory somewhere that we can all enter but another place in extension to the real, with culturally, commercially and politically regulated borders that can be opened or sealed. Moreover, this imbalance is reinforced in critical discourses when debates about media landscapes merely reproduce polarized positions, in particular when they develop viewpoints about the “before and after, “the “here and there“ and so forth, prolonging the assumptions of the cultural industries without examination of the underlying attitudes they produce.

As it stands, even critical debate now seems to have changed profession and to a large extent occupies itself with catching up with the latest technological novelties in a manner that differs sharply from distanced analysis. Because the understanding of the present requires very specific expert knowledge, we are surrounded by a plenitude of expert debates which in different tongues and with a growing labyrinth of technical terms and abbreviations disseminate the order of the new world. For the most part, these voices manifest hierarchies and differences by discussing, for example, almost exclusively Western media as the standard that represents “us“ – thereby deliberately attributing non-Western media to ‘them,’ the ‘other’ without much explanation of the positioning of this discourse. There seems to be an unspoken unwillingness to engage in a real dialogue that would regard it as a matter of course to challenge and rework presumptions of critique. On the contrary, we face an almost jubilant welcoming of the latest consumable tools and the fresh goods of today’s cultural industries, which are creating the rules of networked data communication and information as well as regulation and restriction on a global scale. It has become difficult to determine any critical discourse and argue aesthetically for interventions into complex and diverse media realities. Perhaps the whole project of doing so has become obsolete?

But there are other voices that call for investigations into the roots of these issues, and for increasing awareness of the contexts of media and cultural specificities. Another goal is to dismantle the supposed neutrality of technological developments. These voices are mostly heard from the past and the earlier days of cultural critique, when the digital age and economic globalization were young and embryonic. Prominently in the early nineties, cultural critic Stuart Hall, who had migrated from Jamaica to England, sharply recognized the simplifying and standardizing mechanisms at work in cultural globalization and the world-system. He observed that while we live with difference and by the same token enjoy pluralism, we also absorb highly concentrated, corporate, and indeed over-

corporate, over-concentrated forms of economic power, power which culturally lives and manifests itself through the same difference and finds pleasure in the incorporation of otherness as the demonstration of its strength.

Unsurprisingly, it almost goes without saying that the other and the outside were largely determined as the non-Western, which means something special and exotic, but also lesser, relatively unimportant. One voice in particular can be singled out in providing the answer to the question about where to locate culture between the polarities of self and other, East and West, inside and outside, in the contemporary situation of crossing, mixing, blending, blurring and other hybridizing combinations. Cultural critic Homi K. Bhabha (1994) pointed out that critical engagement beyond such polarities keeps cultural dialogue alive and inhabits the in-between zones with dynamic interaction and open-ended processes. In this respect, radical artists' practices will manifest themselves as creative interventions. The artists' intervention is seen as the instrument of interrupting the performances of present media cultures, and the means of fostering multi-perspectival views in a variety of combinations and intercultural voices which express lively dialogue, and not dead-end polarities.

To explain this further, I'd like to discuss some examples of aesthetic—artistic practices that are situated in the Western and the Eastern contexts and may serve as effective approaches to readdress such one-sided discourses that look from here to there, inside to outside, West to East. In contrast to these limited perspectives, I wish to suggest cross directions and regard it as a matter of course to discuss practices which are relevant to the topic of intervention and emerge in different cultural contexts. It is necessary to consider both media and cultural specificities where the parameters of these worlds are relevant to understanding the impact of the practices and their targets. The aesthetic practices under discussion are those which contribute to the overall level of technological media and highlight strategies of intervention. I do not intend to talk about cultural or media specificities and differences as such.

I propose to look in particular at aesthetic practices within Europe and Japan where I find cross-relations regarding the innovative and radical use and application of electronic, computational, interactive, and representational modes of presentation. The task is to widen the horizon of discussion and to argue for overcoming some of the still existing barriers between media and cultural discourses and also between arts and media. It is not about identifying peculiar Japanese and European, respectively Euroamerican media arts: the notion of art is also not of interest here. The more interesting question is: What are the

overriding, effective and suitable strategies for processes of intervention, dialogue and violation that can cope with standard media tools and technologies which spread out everywhere? By and large, I also think media debates need to be more culturally informed and cultural debates need to develop their expertise on mediation processes. Both need to be able to cope with complex contexts: both need to become sensitive to the articulation of difference without pushing its operations to the fore. In the following, I discuss examples of artist interventions based in Western and also in Asian cultural contexts with the aim to make evident different but related strategies to remediate aesthetic modes of intervention into the media cultures at the time, thereby revealing the potentials of innovative use of novel technologies and demonstrating ways of critique into the emerging and surrounding media cultures.

In a historical view, in 1971, when electronic media were young, a British video pioneer David Hall made a series of remarkable “TV Interruptions“ which were commissioned by Scottish Television and were meant, unannounced, to interrupt the programme flow. Hall provoked dialogue inside television by talking back to the medium with its own means. In a similar way, his self-explanatory videotape *This is a Television Receiver* (UK, 1976) enforced remediation of television through rewinding and re-recording the same videotape three times in a row until the material on screen became a hopelessly jumbled series of ghost-images – until it destroyed both the meaning and the material of the video while still being projected. The loss of sound and vision from generation to generation of videotape exhausted the capacities of the analogue medium of the time. The video work, through demonstrated timeshifting, technically deconstructed the essential characteristics of a live medium as it was dismantled at the core of a decaying videotape. This disappearance of understandable sounds and recognizable images finally produces the electronic snow that truly constitutes the raw material of any electronic medium. Hall’s installation tape, which needs to be shown on a monitor, merges video and television on the same technical basis, both visually and aurally, and uses video as an intervention into television.

In a related spirit or exploring the language of a newly developed technology that step by step turns into a medium, Steina Vasulka in experimental video performances provoked disturbances like the maladjustment of the video signal, feedback effects and processing of scan lines. The video performances were meant to dismantle the structural capacities of a new medium in ways that unfold a) its close connection to computer processes and b) its fundamental audio-visual interchangeability. In a series of performances, Steina plays video and violin

thereby demonstrating the visibility of audio in video and the audibility of video as two possible ways to simultaneously present audio and/or video information that is encoded in the video signal. In these processes the true nature of video as an audiovisual medium becomes evident and furthermore the structural interchangeability of audio and video demonstrates its familiarity with the processual nature of digital images. In the performances of *Violin Power* between 1970 and 1978, Steina analyzes the modes of expression of video from the perspective of an audio artist trained in music. Thereby the intermedial capacities of video apparently help to characterize the new medium as audiovisual. In this circuit structure we hear what we see and we see what we hear. Steina is playing a violin and the video at the same time, and both media intersect in their performative, open-ended capacities.

Violin Power is a presentation of various video processes in which the violinist Steina Vasulka demonstrates live how she plays video with the violin. The artist comes from Iceland, had moved to New York and became attracted to video because it allowed new ways of composition and a development away from pinhole perspective toward machine vision and a type of frame-unbound imagery that would free and exceed the limitations of film and cinematic presentation. The violin becomes an instrument for the simultaneous generation of image and sound, as the sound of the violin playing, which was recorded using a microphone, is connected to video devices, scan processors, and multikeyers. This happens in real time processing resulting in a visual manifestation of the artist's performance, which was recorded simultaneously with two video cameras. The movements of the bow on the violin's strings in these video/violin performances generate immediate deviations on the image position of this movement. Thus, Vasulka plays violin and video at the same time. As the audience can see and hear, by exposing the specific properties of the medium, David Hall and Steina Vasulka clearly hurt and disrupt the viewer's expectations that were being shaped so powerfully in the seventies by television broadcast throughout audiences in Europe and the US..

Twenty years later, the Austrian artistic duo Granular Synthesis (this is Kurt Hentschläger and Ulf Langheinrich) – in another approach to using media behaviour against the grain – dismantled the raw material from inside. For the live performances of the audio/video installation *Model 5* (1994–1996) [Fig. 1], they allowed digitally processed images and sounds from four video output channels and eight audio outputs to interact. This produced a multi-sensual perceptual experience. The duo's name says it all; the granular synthesis separates

a videographic recording into units of information and subsequently samples and resynthesizes them.

In *Model 5*, the previously recorded image/sound material of the Japanese performer Akemi Takeya is broken down into its smallest processable elements in an analytical process, and then, in a process of reconstruction, reassembled in another frequency, so that the image and sound fragments produced by this recombination deviate from the continuity of the original in a clearly audible and visible way. The synchronicity and stability of the image and the sound are dissolved. The electronic course of the image and sound is no longer synchronized conventionally: image and sound are separated, blurred, and perceived erratically as flickers. Furthermore, the newly produced frequencies are modulated live.

In *Model 5*, the audience perceives this intervention into the audiovisual material by means of granular synthesis as violent and painful, because the artists dissect the voice and the portrait of Takeya. Her natural rhythm is eliminated and replaced by a mechanical rhythm in the sequence which violently interferes with her voice. In effect, she can no longer communicate with the audience and becomes a kind of building block for machine systems – and this can be read as a metaphor standing in for all the anthropomorphic computer designed hybrids in science fiction. It is a mathematical operation of digital analysis that is applied to a video recording of Takeya's performance. Where the base video material stands for continuity in the performance (which in the electronic medium is not mandatory), the digital editing of the live presentation is used to make us aware of the media level.

In the work of Granular Synthesis, the audience perceives the presentation as disruptive, because synchronicity has been removed. In a technically different but conceptually related approach, Dutch video installation artist Aernout Mik also causes disorientation and rupture. The work achieves confusion not by violating the material, but by presenting violent scenes of group action that never show the violent event. Locations are unclear: all we know is that the events are taking place somewhere in Europe, as the uniforms, vehicles, clothing and open spaces indicate. Fiction and reality are inseparably blurred. We cannot tell what is real and what is staged. Intense scenes of humiliation, tinged with a flavour of uncertainty, tension and violence, unfold in front of the camera and us. Opposing sides are not clearly marked or identifiable, the whole situation is unstable: even the order of events and sides is constantly changing. There is no narrative beginning or end, no inside and outside, no clear borders or rules: everything is somehow merged, confused, everything is possible and imposed power-relations

can suddenly reverse. The situation is one of ever-growing alertness, an excess of constant tension. The question arises: is this real or staged? And does the difference matter?

What kind of reality is Aernout Mik showing in his video installations? There are training camps, police, military, protesters demonstrations, groups of displaced people, evacuation and other emergencies, searches, raids and security zones, warlike scenarios and warfare: in short, a cross-section of daily television news around the world. And yet this uncanny state of emergency and terror somehow gains our contemporary consent when we assume it is real, when we watch the news. What matters in Mik's media world is the presentation format which renders the materials strange and induces us to interrogate the contexts. The formal strategies are reserved, not competing with the shocking content: he uses dual projections to stress the continuation of such scenes: they are not single events. The editing creates visible blanks and inserts lack – meaningless space that interrupts our viewing for long moments in such a way that we reflect on our interest in viewing such materials. The sound is absent; our full concentration can only be on the visual and we are kept aware of the artist's position between the presentation and the presented. In the video installation *Training Ground* (NL, 2006) a refugee-, war- or prison camp-like field in the open air is inhabited by different groups, armed and unarmed, who – although there is no direct violence – cannot leave, but are exchanging power positions.

In another, topicwise related video installation, *Raw Footage* marks an exception in Aernout Mik's work, in that it is real material with real sound where nothing has been staged. The footage comes from journalists filming the Yugoslavian wars in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia. Mik bought the footage from Reuters: it was never broadcast. As you will see and hear, there is not much difference between this and the enactment in the first video. The effect is disorienting and shocking – especially when we see the teams filming each other in the midst of war. By juxtaposing fiction and reality we may also get a feeling of how realities converge for those inside the camp. Another uncomfortable result of these works may be that taken together they highlight the necessity of verifying the sources and contexts of materials that are unknowable.

Leaving this cultural context and turning to another, I'd like to present works by Japanese media artists Seiko Mikami and architect Sota Ichikawa. In their collaborative interactive installation *Gravicells* (Japan, 2004) [Fig. 2] they develop and construct technical tools as models to revitalize the dialogue between the media and human perception in similar ways to the examples discussed so far.

When entering the floor space of the interactive installation *Gravicells* we are invited to experience our position/location data through collected and projected GPS data. The GPS data are visualized on the floor and the viewer/user interacts with the projected data of one's own physical behaviour and gravity. Thereby we experience our relation to earth gravity and to other persons sharing the same space. The work visualizes and materializes non-visual senses and creates an open, flexible and transforming kind of imagery that gives a wider perceptual experience. The movements and changes made by the participant are transformed and displayed as movements of sound, light and geometrical images through the sensors. In result, the complete space transforms in this interactive installation. Because the position of the actual exhibition space is determined by GPS through antennas on the rooftop and this measured data are included in the projection, the participant can experience his/her locality in relation to the gravity of earth while walking on the floor that has wired tubes filled with liquid and is equipped with sensors that detect position, weight and speed. Based on the proximity and distances between the moving participants, their GPS data and the GPS data of the installation site create another space by light, sound and images. The visualization is based on the dynamics of the participants and displayed onto the floor and also projected in 3d on the walls in realtime. The installation space is mediating between personal, physical behaviour and the outside environment.

Finally, I would like to introduce another endeavour of Japan media arts to exhausting and inventing technical tools in a dialogical intervention that addresses the media and the cultural spaces of encounter. In a series of "field-works", Masaki Fujihata uses mobile technologies and mixes real and virtual spaces for the purpose of interpersonal and intercultural dialogue. In the project *Landing Home in Geneva* (Japan/Switzerland, 2005) [Figs. 3–4], Fujihata gives an example of how to represent transcultural experiences with digital technologies in spatial relations that merge real and virtual data. The intercultural understanding of the concept of 'home' is investigated when Fujihata uses a complex recording system (video camera with parabolic mirror lens, GPS, Personal Data Systems and positioning data of the camera angle) to interview other foreigners who live and work in and around the Swiss city of Geneva as professional interpreters.

In the computer, this visual data are transformed into a specific kind of panorama which is interfaced so that each scene has an inside and an outside view. The panoramas are connected in the virtual space in terms of the location and the moving activity of the actual interviews. And the user/viewer of this

interactive installation can manoeuvre between the different sides of the dialogue during the interviews but also experience different views for him/herself: both distanced viewing and being immersed inside the situation at the same time. Fujihata's participating investigation attempts to communicate views and attitudes in the translation of cultures across languages and borders.

Extending this observation of borders, differences and translations from multiple viewpoints, the artist is also the interviewer, and this too is audio-visually integrated within the recorded scene. So this intervention within the processes of field research is further highlighted when we, the viewers and users, see and hear the artist immersed into a real scene at the time as he records it, and when we can access the scene through the visible timeline from various arbitrary viewpoints in the virtual. By gaining control of the field and being part of its unfolding vividness, the subject and object positions are shown to be flexible and interchangeable.

To come back to the beginning and to conclude: what is the role of the arts in the overall situation once the virtual media have become real extensions and communicating partners and we have learnt to use media individually as creative tools? In response, one could answer that these days, after almost endless and more tiring than insightful interrogations of modernist and postmodernist conditions of media, arts and technology, everything has been said before and there is nothing new on the horizon. We face a highly saturated tradition of media arts before and after the frenetically debated analogue-digital divide, which when viewed retrospectively does not really help the discussion of cultural and media specific approaches in creative practices. But there is an alternative point of view. In fact, I think now might be the right time to reconsider some concepts of innovation and experiment. And, also aesthetic intervention into the media landscapes that are evolving on a global scale.

In this more positive view, we can envision aesthetic practices leading a discourse of dialogue and encounter beyond borderlines and differences. They also demonstrate that we do not need to understand and explain all the wonderful new possibilities that emerge in proportion to the growing corporate-commercial global media landscape. They reveal precisely the opposite: that we can regard creative practices as a fascinating field of production that bypasses all the heated debates on Western-Eastern interactions in the fields of cultural studies and those on the analogue-digital divide in the fields of media studies. Departing from normal practices in these fields, appreciating technological cultures in new ways is possible when we turn our attention to subversive, ironic, and paradoxical

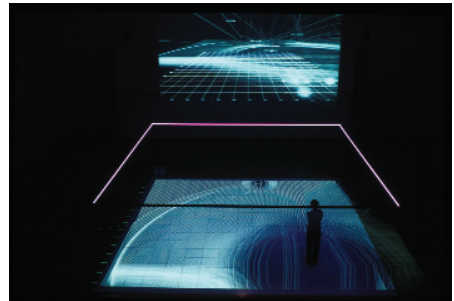
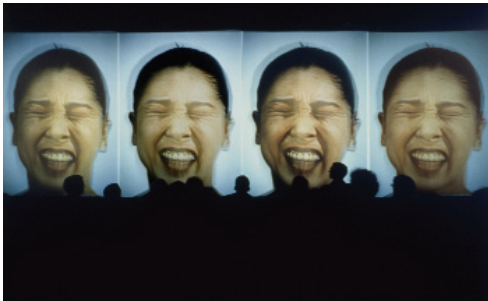
processes in media arts. Artists' practices can be characterized as interventions when they encourage us to reflect our uncertainty while acting and interacting in passages between fixed realities where difference can be enjoyed in the present. And the present is the right time for intervention.

References

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Figs. 1–2. Granular Synthesis: *Model 5* (1994–1996), Seiko Mikami and Sota Ichikawa: *Gravicells* (Japan, 2004).



Figs. 3–4. Masaki Fujihata: *Landing Home in Geneva* (Japan/Switzerland, 2005).

