

Gordon Winiemko / SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT “NEW MEDIA” IN QUOTES

As someone who works with video, both as an artist and for hire, I sometimes find myself documenting events, performances, art installations, and the like. Not long ago I provided my services for an artist renowned for confrontational, sometimes shocking performances. The whole thing was very multimedia. Well, now one would say “new media.” Video projection. Sampled footage and sounds. *Beats*, I should say. A live video feed of the performance itself, added to the mix. As I roamed the area, taking it all in with my video camera, what struck me was that however much it was dressed up in the latest accoutrements, there was no concealing the weariness of the old “performance art” shtick, Karen Finley smearing chocolate on herself at the flavor-of-the-month club.

I suppose there must have been a time when “performance art” seemed new or fresh. Still, it’s hard for me to understand how anyone could do a performance, as in “Now I will perform for you,” when everything is already theater, everything is permeated by the spectacle – in the face of which what makes sense to me as a strategy is not performance, but *performative action*. The other term that seems relevant is the increasingly familiar “intervention.” A theater or art space is the natural, expected venue for one to whip out a golden, inflatable, phallus; much less so a “Textiles of the Future” conference in Finland. Into the theater of commerce, the Yes Men inserted the theater of the absurd. Or was it cruelty?¹ Of course, the absurd could be said to be already a component of commerce, but this bit of art-as-activism (or is it activism-as-art?) – popularized by both the recent documentary on the Yes Men and the Mass MOCA show “The Interventionists” – strikes me as nevertheless more potent than the programmatic experience of the proscenium arch or art gallery.

Speaking of the programmatic, it’s nice how, years after I acquired a bootleg of it on VHS tape, I can now watch the NBC *Tomorrow Show* interview with

John Lydon on crisp (albeit riddled with *lossy* compression) DVD.² Tom Snyder wanted Johnny to perform according to showbiz conventions: "I ask you the questions we've already agreed upon, you give me the answers I'm expecting." *Nevermind* whether the Host is genuinely interested in or informed about the Guest. Johnny famously (though perhaps predictably) wasn't having it, and at one point Snyder, bereft of his cool, demanded to know if there was anything John *liked* – the classic clueless grownup question.

I could perform on cue myself, and provide a list of "new media" work that I like. I just recently took Janet Cardiff's video walk-through of San Francisco MOMA again and, like the first time, it did not fail to move me. So too, as always, did a recent show of Jim Campbell's work.³

I could also easily rack up a list of work that has struck me as little more than "gimmicky," half-baked. I've lost count of the number of bells and whistles I've triggered by the sounds I make, or my movements in a public space like a gallery or plaza. Nice effects, but what do they do, except fetishize technology and passively recapitulate the paradigm, or the received knowledge, of interactivity?

Confronted with the label *new media*, I remember an old saying: it's the singer, not the song. The other applicable adage is, of course, McLuhan's "The medium is the message." When considering these kinds of portentous displays, I find myself not infrequently wondering, "isn't film already interactive?"⁴ Or any work that is informed by discursive practice, such as the "dialogic" projects by the artists Grant Kestor references in *Conversation Pieces* – artists like Stephen Willats, Suzanne Lacy, and the Austrian collective WochenKlausur – where the locus of the piece is not an object, or even in a so-called "interactive" experience had by a spectator, but in the ephemeral and downright analog conversations shared by people who are all participants, even co-creators.

In the early 1990s, in San Francisco, where I was living at the time, the characteristically cold, fog-drenched air was laced with an outpouring of *fin de siècle* technopagan optimism. Oh, how the internet will open up new liberating avenues of communication! Fast-forward a few years, to the late 1990s – said "communication" is finally revealed to be a stunning illustration of Douglas Adams' theory: the *movement of small green pieces of paper*.⁵ Adams' basic message, packaged in scene after scene, in incarnation after incarnation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is that no matter how much we appear to make "progress," we stay the same, and that our blunders can be attributed to not

keeping things in perspective. His description of contemporary humanity as a people “who still think that digital watches are a pretty neat idea” was hilarious back in the late 70s, when the digital watch fad had peaked, and his insight into the constant, modern lure of techno-optimism demonstrated how little western culture had learned from the extravagances of the “Me Generation,” we’d all been suckered again, blinded by bling. Now, narrow the context to the art world, and substitute new media for digital watches.

Back then – after *Hitchhiker’s*, yet before the 90s dot-bomb, I wrote an article in which, looking ahead to the then-unnamed medium we now know as web-based video, or more colloquially, YouTube (sorry, ifilm!), I referenced the dictum with which Clinton’s advisers were reputed to have won him the ’92 election: “It’s the economy, stupid.” Then, imagining the glut of video to come, I wrote, “it’s the content, stupid.” Now, contemplating new media, or technology-based art, or interactivity, the original, unaltered phrase seems appropriate.

But no one asked me to build up and trash a straw man. When considering technology, one need not pit the new against the old, or the rhetoric of liberation against determinism. Perhaps what is called for is a new way of thinking, one that goes beyond the binary either/or.

I could reach for the ballyhooed model of *gaming* as such an alternative, a model in which *play*, rather than slavish, linear, goal-directed *production*, holds sway, where there is no conclusion, but a process encompassing a field of complex, interlocking actions – but behind this, ironically, are ones and zeroes, either/or.

I’m much more inclined to sidestep the matter of new vs. old media altogether and revisit the question of *mimesis* vs. *diegesis*. Indeed, I find the latter binary opposition far more relevant to contemporary artistic practice and, if I have not already made it clear, I come down firmly on the side of experiential communication as opposed to the (re)presentation of an image and/or object. In doing so, I’m consigning images and image-makers to a ghetto of the regressive. But how is it any less regressive, the idea of communication? “I want to change the world,” a friend and fellow artist told me recently. So you’ll do that by being a Great Communicator, and aping the model of Capital? The object that is ostensibly absent from diegetic, experiential art practice can be located in the form of the information or the message that The Communicator wants to convey, commodity-like, to the spectator-consumer. The artists who make

careers out of tackling *important issues* are ones who often have to resort to a defensive mantra like “all art is political.” If that’s the case, then why do they (why do *we*) persist in making work nominally pre-classified as “political art”? Perhaps, such a tendency merely mimics common tactics within post-industrial capital, where the best way to make a living seems increasingly dependent upon defining some particular niche market.

I wonder how many people remember the Church of the Subgenius. It was around the time that the wave that crashed with *The Industry Standard* was just starting to form with *Mondo 2000* that I coincidentally began to hear less and less about the Church, a mock religion that at once lampooned institutionalized salvation and provided both a mythology and a community for the disaffected. The Church is circumscribed by irony and cynicism, both of which are tied to a wearying lack of faith, yet it manages to avoid the emotional bitterness usually associated with such qualities. What it looks like with hindsight is that a lot of those alienated geeks found faith in the form of the tech revolution. “The very thing that’s made me feel outcast is hot, goddamn it, and I can make a lot of money at it too!” Like the prospectors in the previous century’s Gold Rush, many of them got wiped out.

Maybe they might have been “saved” from that fate if they had remembered one of the most compelling slogans of the Church of the Subgenius: *pull the wool over your own eyes*. It’s not possible to proclaim oneself an “artist” and not have a career. There is no question but of being a participant, of being complicit, and it may not even be a question of degree. Perhaps gaming is an instructive paradigm, after all. The artist must never lose sight of playing a role. We have had the *avatars* of Duchamp and Warhol, and now we have in the figure of Barney the *corporate player* – is there any other kind?

But is Matthew subverting his own paradigm? Is he pulling the wool over his own eyes? It’s the difference between a wholesale adopting or *buying into* a model and deconstructing it. The paradigm that I keep invoking in one form or another could be said to be on display in the work of artists like Alex Galloway and Cory Archangel, who quite literally hack video games. But that’s just it – it’s literal. Just as “interactivity” is its own message, so, too, is “hacking.” Marshall, can a particular piece carry a message beyond that of its medium? But what many artists forget is that a medium is not some monolithic edifice, but a set of codified procedures. What artist worthy of the name does not try to undermine the codified?

So in other words, I'm arguing for new procedures: *new media*. Maybe what at this moment seems inevitable has felt alienating to me because it too has already become codified and calcified, such that "new media" can indeed now be thought of as an *it* – another thing we have to get beyond, a Gordian Knot to slice through rather than gamely try to untangle. Maybe that's why a lot of my recent projects have been so willfully low-tech. For *Untitled (current events)*, my idea of interactivity was to offer a gigantic, antiquated U-matic video deck which I had modified to stop at random intervals when its tape is played, forcing the participant to choose whether or not to continue.⁶ For another recent piece, *Retroactive Continuity*, I used one of those old fashioned VHS decks to loop an old-fashioned credit roll in the gallery, with which I paired an opening reception performative action, the eminently low-tech (and archaic) practice of streaking.⁷ I wonder, especially with this latter piece, if someone will dismiss me as an artist who plays around, as I once dismissed Vancouver artist Rodney Graham. But is Graham playing around, or "playing around" in quotes? I have come to think of my "video with streaking" piece as putting quotes around something that is already in quotes. What I was wearing on my (nonexistent) sleeve, in that piece, is my struggle with how to intervene in the programmatic when "intervention" has by now made a spectacle of itself. How can we intervene when there is no space conceivable outside the space of intervention?

I suppose what I'm saying is that using old media that was once new is like putting quotes around "new media," rendering it... "new media."

I like the way that looks on the page – aesthetically speaking, as it were. Yet at some point I suppose I will have to break out another set of quotation marks. Although by then maybe *it* will have already dissolved.

Or maybe I just won't be asked to write about *it* anymore.

NOTES

¹ When the conference organizers mistook two artists' mock WTO/GATT website as real, the artists decided to attend, masquerading as WTO representatives. They gave a presentation highlighting the gold phallic suit as a high-tech means to remotely monitor and control "workers" in third world nations. The attendees bought it wholesale, and the Yes Men were born.

² DVD (digital versatile disc) is the long awaited improvement over the long-standing home video format, VHS (vertical helical scan). What the former gains

in image resolution, it sacrifices in the form of visible digital compression artifacts; part of the information is lost, hence “lossy compression.” Tom Snyder had a late night talk show in the late 70s/early 80s on the NBC network; one of his producers evidently thought it was a good idea to feature the “new wave” in music, and Snyder had as guests Iggy Pop, The Jam, Elvis Costello, among others. Snyder has since dropped from the scene, and DVD is about to be replaced by a new videodisc format.

³ Janet Cardiff’s site specific walk-through of the SF MOMA was originally part of the institution’s 2001 show on art and technology called *010101:Art in Technological Times*. Visitors were given video cameras with headphones and led via Cardiff’s voice on a performative “tour” of the gallery. Jim Campbell is an artist who manipulates video and images with a host of specialized processes, and works in the SF Bay area.

⁴ It could be said that a film asks no more than to be passively observed, but I would argue that the diegetic, experiential process of communication in which film engages asks more of its audience than the mimesis of image/object based fine art. “Diegetic” indicates a two-sided process, after all. Even though the audience and the film (makers) are not literally in conversation, there is an exchange taking place.

⁵ On balance, it could be said that what encouraged the dot-com boom to thrive in SF is exactly what allowed me to thrive in my more high-minded artistic pursuits. The economic climate was ripe for “start-ups” of all kinds; the city was just emerging from the recession of the late 1980s, and rents were low. The familiar argument is: how could they stay low forever? Sooner or later one has to succeed, and in our society money follows success. By the same token, the “liberationist” ethic that circumscribes ’Frisco is, to use an eminently 90s term, empowering to a variety of creative endeavors.

⁶ The tape in question consisted of a collection of interviews in which people talked about the parenthetical of the title. I edited out all the details, leaving only generalities.

⁷ Like the other piece, the form of the presentation seems the most germane to this essay, but it should be noted that the text of the video is a similarly specificity-drained series of imploring exhortations to “end the war.” CAN THE WAR JUST BE OVER NOW? I JUST WANT THE WAR TO BE OVER. CAN WE JUST END THE WAR PLEASE? DO YOU WANT TO END THE WAR?