

Merely Incentive

An address given at the Renew: Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology, Riga, on October 10, 2013. (lightly edited; updated April 25, 2014)

My case study of the IIASANET, which deals with a less known attempt to establish an international computer network in the Central and Eastern Europe in the 1970s, required the formulation of the wider questions about the history of technology in relation to the history of art, which I feel are appropriate to be posed also at this conference. I am going to address them first, risking the running out of the 15-minute conference limit for paper presentations too early. In that case, you are welcome to access its online version at <http://monoskop.org/IIASANET>.

The notion of media has been a persisting subject of the discussions of the past days at the conference and of the past many years in the events positioned between art and technology. It is no wonder, since the fields of art and technology each understand this notion in the frameworks of their own. Their juxtaposition therefore sees the media being loaded and scraped of its meaning at the same time.

In his recent book *Anti-Media*, Florian Cramer reminded that “there are two almost unrelated notions of ‘media’ that clash in art theory today: the notion of medium as a means of artistic expression, such as painting or sculpture [...]; and the notion of medium as a carrier of information that has its roots in nineteenth-century physics” (pp 12-13). The ambiguity of this double-sided legacy is nowhere more persistent than in the very term “media art”.

Let’s briefly look at the histories of these ‘two media’. One history began gathering momentum in the 1940s when Clement Greenberg claimed medium-specificity the central concern of the arts. And while his subject matter was mostly limited to the plastic arts, by far was he not alone; similar discussions were happening beforehand and afterwards about poetry, music, or photography by the likes of Wassily Kandinsky, T. S. Eliot, Beaumont Newhall or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing as early as the 18th century. A recurring theme in these discussions was that the medium (such as painting in case of Greenberg) became an autonomous force that communicated nothing outside of its own self-contained properties established by a tradition in which this medium is grounded.

On the other hand, Marshall McLuhan’s notion of the media emerged from his discussion of Claude Shannon’s famous five-stage model of communication, which assigns the source, sender, channel, receiver and destination of communication a mathematical function. McLuhan’s theory of “understanding media” (as channels in this model) was later in the 1980s taken up by Friedrich Kittler. He proposed that any medium or channel of communication is a material technology, and thus

cannot be understood in an interpretive sense. For example: how is it possible to understand a message once it is coded into a signal? What could a pulse of electricity possibly mean? Kittler's notion of the media broke from that of McLuhan's in subsuming to the impossibility of understanding media as technologies, for technologies are said to create the conditions under which understanding, or interpretive activity more generally, may take place, rather than vice versa.

While one notion tasks artists with exploration of their very means of expression, the other explains the communication as signals.

What they share is the ideal of a certain purity for which one theorist was attacked as a modernist, and the other as a so-called 'media-determinist'.

How can these two histories, of medium in art and of media in technology, inform each other?

One way of bridging them which has been rather persistent over the times and also reappearing in the talks at this conference is the will for establishing communication channels (being viewed as a "creative" act). This will is very well embedded within the history of technology where, it has to be said, it is subsumed particularly to the ideas of utility, optimization and efficiency. These ideals have also informed the development of new kinds of communication channels, new media, of which computing, computer networking, satellite communication and the internet have been talked about here the most.

To give an example. Computer networking found its origin in the early DARPA research which started with the interest in making more efficient use of the very expensive mainframe machines. A way to solve this was the idea of remote ("online") interaction between a user at a terminal and a mainframe computer, which was dubbed "interactive computing". Soon it became clear that computers may be shared by a number of users at once, which gave way to the idea of "time-sharing". Making efficient use of the computing resources was then the primary force behind the emergence of computer networks, in combination with so-called packet switching, which was a solution for reliable data transmission in a network with highly turbulent volumes of traffic. While packet switching itself was inspired by so called batch processing, which was a solution to automate software processes in a computer. By 1972 there were about three dozen computer networks either in operation or in development. A 'net of nets', or an internet, later the internet, soon emerged as a solution to interconnecting networks with different protocols, and particularly by building gateways (routers) to 'rewrap' packets of one network for another.

Problem-solving is a defining aspect of technology. And although problem-solving involves many creative and undogmatic operations (such as the invention of a principle for data transmission between computers out of a principle of automated

data operations inside the computer), the inventive in technology is merely its incentive. The inventive is still subsumed to the pragmatic—to optimization and efficiency.

This “merely” is of course already the artist speaking. So, to take it to the other side, what is the incentive of art? We may argue it is to let people speak, to communicate, to establish communication channels between people. But then we can also ask, how does this differ from the role of the technologist? Another reading, Greenberg’s, would give art the incentive to explore the properties of its medium. This may well be an ill-posed statement. Not necessarily because of the ‘grand narrativity’ of modernism, but because of its instrumentality (of defining the incentive of art). But, many artists do explore the properties of their media, and what is also true, very few artworks are free of technical or other kinds of problem-solving.

So while the inventive is inherent to both art and technology, what makes art different from technology is its resistance to the subsumption to the rule of the solvable. In the realm of technology this subsumption was criticized among others by Martin Heidegger in his *Question Concerning Technology* by the term “danger” [Gefahr], or recently, by Evgeny Morozov in what he calls “solutionism” in his book *To Save Everything, Click Here*.

The ambiguity of the two-fold notion of media could be further addressed through the questions of aesthetics and knowledge. Here it would be interesting to ask how the distribution of the sensible (in Jacques Rancière’s reading) interferes with the notion of épistème, ie. the condition of the possibility of discourses (in Michel Foucault’s reading, which was further examined by Kittler). Following this thread might give ground to further questioning of the relevance of the history of technology for the history of art.

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