10 Key Texts on New Media Art, 1970-2000

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1. Gene Youngblood, Expanded Cinema (New York: Dulton, 1970).
2. Jasia Reichardt, The Computer in Art (London: 1971).
3. Cynthia Goodman, Digital Visions: Computers and Art, (New York: 1987).
4. Friedrich Kittler, Discourse Networks (Stanford, 1990). (Original German edition 1985).
5. Michael Benedikt, ed., Cyberspace: First Steps (Cambridge, Mass.: 1991).
6. Artinctact 1: Artists' Interactive CD-ROMagazine (Karlsruhe, 1994).
7. Minna Tarkka et all, eds., The 5th International Symsposium on Electronic Art Catalogue (ISEA), (Helsinki, 1994.)
8. Peter Weibel et al, eds., Mythos Information: Welcome to the Wired World. Ars Electronica 1995 Festival Catalog, edited by Peter Weibel (Vienna and New York: 1995).
9. Espen Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (Baltimore: 1997).
10. Ulf Poschard, DJ Culture (London, 1998). (Original publication in German, 1995).

Working on my assignment to select "written works considered important to the history of digital art, culture and technology" turned out to be quite difficult. In contrast to other art fields, the short memory of digital art field is very short, while its long term memory is practically absent. As a result, many artists working with computers, as well as curators and critics who exhibit and write about these artists, keep reinventing the wheels over and over and over. And while other fields usually have certain critical / theoretical texts which are known to everybody and which usually act as starting points for the new arguments and debates, digital art field has nothing of a kind. No critical text on digital art so far has achieved a familiarity status that can be compared with the status of the classic articles by Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss (modern art), or Andre Bazin and Laura Mulvey (film). So what does it mean to select "written works

considered important to the history of digital art"? The field did produce many substantial texts that were important to it at particular historical points, but since these texts are not remembered, they have no bearings to its current development.

If you think that I am overstating my point, consider the following example. Think of important museum shows and their catalogs that act as key reference points in the field of modern art. How many among visitors to Bitsreams (The Whitney Museum, 2001) and 010101: Art in Technological Times (SFMOMA, 2001) knew that thirty years ago the major art museums in New York and London presented a whole stream shows on the topics of art and technology. Taken together, these shows were more radical and more conceptually interesting than the current attempts of art museums to come to terms with new media. Here are some of them: Cybernetic Serendipity (ICA, curated by Jasia Reichardt, 1968), The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age (MOMA, curated by K.G. Pontus Hulten, 1968), Software, Information Technology: its Meanng for Art (Jewish Museum, New York, curated by Jack Burnham, 1970), Information (MOMA, curated by Kynaston McShine, 1970), Art and Technology (LACMA, curated by Maurice Tuchman, 1970).

While the number of online exhibitions which were organized by Steve Dietz at the Walker, the recent exhibitions at the Z Lounge at the New Museum in NYC (Anne Barlow and Anne Ellegoood), the shows/events curated by Christiane Paul at the Whitney and Jon Ippolito at the Guggenheim all are quite sophisticated, all of them are also small-scale affairs. In terms of large-scale museum recent museum surveys, only the one at SFMOMA (2001) can be compared to the exhibitions of the thirty years ago. It was an ambitious attempt to sample the whole landscape of contemporary culture in order to present how artists and designers across a number of disciplines engage with computing on a variety of levels: as a tool, as a medium, as iconography, as a source of new perceptual, cognitive and communication skills and habits. In comparison, the show at The Whitney was a truly reactionary affair. Here was a show on new media art that did not include any computers or interactive works. Instead, new media was reduced to flat images on the walls: stills presented as digital prints or moving images presented

with projectors or plazma screens. The descriptions on the works positioned them within the familiar and well-rehearsed narratives and categories of standard twentieth century art textbooks. In short, new media was neutralized, diluted, rendered harmless, similar to the way commercial culture takes over most of the new radical cultural developments, from hip-hop to techno.

In contrast, just reading the titles of the exhibitions that took place thirty years ago you can see that they engaged with the new categories and dimensions of the emerging techno-culture. In terms of the works and projects presented, the museums similarly were not afraid to invite new technologies and new types of artistic practice within their spaces.[1] For example, The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age presented works by 100 artists, including commissioned collaborations between artists and engineers under the umbrella of EAT (compare this to current practice of US art museums to commission "net art" which then can be safely "tucked away" on museum Web sites instead of the actual galleries.) Software exhibition included a number of works which used PDP-8 computer in the museum, while Information engaged with information and communication revolution on a conceptual level by presenting a number of projects which asked the viewers to engage in particular communication scenarios constructed by artists, who included Vito Acconci and Hans Haacke).

Given the systematic absence of long-term memory in digital art field, just ten texts would not be enough to reconstruct its rich fifty-year history. So here is the selection algorithm I ended up following:

(1) Given my limit of ten texts, I decided to be a little subjective and to give weight to the texts that were particularly important for me since I first learned about digital art.

[1] For more information on these shows and other important milestones in the fifty year history of computer and telecommunication art, see excellent Telematic Timeline produced as a part of the show curated by Steve Dietz (http://telematic.walkerart.org/timeline/).

(2) Given that the digital art field does not really has a set of “canonical” critical texts, I instead selected a few texts which at different decades acted as key reviews of the field (The Computer in Art, 1971; Expanded Cinema, 1970; Digital Visions, 1987).

(3) Since the annual festivals/exhibitions such as Ars Electronica, ISEA and SIGGRAPH played the key role in development of the field, I next included couple of representative catalogs from the particularly important meetings (ISEA 94, Ars Electronica 95).

(4) I then added the first publication from ZKM’s Artinctact series (artinctact 1, 1994). Early on, ZKM solved the two key problems of the digital art field – distribution and criticism – in a particularly elegant and efficient way. Every year since 1994 ZKM published a CD-ROM/book. CD-ROM would contain 3 interactive art projects while the book would present critical texts about each of the projects (today ZKM continues this successful format with new series which use DVD-ROM instead of CD-ROM). By following the book format and by teaming up with a major German book publisher, ZKM assured that artintact would be distributed through the standard book distribution channels. (It only took the Whitney eight years to catch up: Whitney 2002 Biannual catalog similarly included a CDROM attached to the front cover.)[2]

(5) While digital art fields does not has a canon of critical texts about the art itself, most people in it are familiar with at least some theoretical texts dealing with the larger topics of digital technology / culture / society. I think that in fact a number of such theoretical texts act as equivalent of canonical critical texts in other art fields. Since I had the limit of ten texts total, I could only include a small sample of such theoretical works. I choose Discourse Networks by Friedrich Kittler (1985; English edition 1990); Cyberspace: First Steps, edited by Michael Benedikt (1991), DJ Culture by Ulf Poshardt (1995; English edition 1998); and Cybertext by Espen Aarseth (1997). But I could have equally well selected books by Katherine Hayles, Sherry Turkle, W.J.T. Mitchell, Paul Virilio, Peter Lunenfeld, Jay David Bolter, Pierre Levy, Geert Lovink, Norman Klein, Vivian Sobchack,

[2] In 2002 Hatje Cantz Publishers published The Complete Artinact 1994-99 CD-ROMamagazine on DVD-ROM.

Peter Weibel, Slavoj Zizek, Erkki Huhtamo, Margaret Morse, Alex Galloway, Matt Fuller, and many others (and this is just the people who write in English or available in English translation; internationally, the list of brilliant commentators on techno-culture goes on and on.)[3]

I think that each of the four theoretical books I selected has something unique about it. Benedikt's best-selling collection is exemplarily in bringing together theorists, artists and computer designers or early cyberspaces such as Habitat – and somehow forcing the designers to write clear and theoretically sophisticated descriptions of their projects and research programs. The best of the anthologies and conferences on digital arts and new media culture try to create such a mix, but few succeed in doing it the way Cyberspace: First Steps did.

Kittler is probably the most important media theorist after McLuhan, and in his master opus Discourse Networks he is able to accomplish another difficult "convergence" trick – bringing together "the best of" what in the US called "critical theory" (in his case it is Lacan and Foucault) with his own brilliant ideas about the effects of communication networks and media recording/storage/access technologies on culture. Again, this is a kind of "convergence" which many try to do but probably only Kittler has succeeded so far.

Many would agree that the two areas of culture where the new logic of digital computing always shows up significantly earlier than in other fields is computer games and electronic music. While I know next to nothing about popular electronic music, I found DJ Culture to be a brilliant mix of broad social, cultural and technological history of the field and provocative theoretical speculations. Too many books and anthologies on electronic music put you to sleep with too much detail about this or that piece of technology - DJ Culture manages to stay focus on the concepts. In his writing, Munich-

[3] I decided not to include in my final "top 10" list any works by my Southern California colleagues: Hayles, Lunenfeld, Klein, and Sobchack. Why am I being so naïve? New York people only curate/publish themselves all the time…

based Ulf Poshardt also successfully integrates “remix” inspired style of exposition and a more standard historical structure that keeps you on track through this think book.

Finally, in his thin but dense Cybertext Espen Aarseth offers a particularly elegant solution to the key question of digital arts and culture field: how to separate new and old media? Although he is concerned with texts, his approach can be extended to other media, providing a reach paradigm for thinking about the relationships between the old and the new media. Read this book if you missed it! (I don't want to do his complex and clear arguments injustice by trying to sum them in two sentences here…)

At the end, it is probably to the best that the arguments in digital arts do not always return to the same few “master” texts over and over and over, the way it often happens in the art world and in humanities. As Norman Klein once put it, “to paint with a computer is to paint with a machine gun” – meaning that a digital computer is unprecedented in being the key engine of modern economy, the key control and communication technology of modern societies, and also their key representational machine. Given this unprecedented “convergence,” any serious reflection on the social and cultural dynamics of our time has to engage with digital computing.

The fact that the theoretical texts which address the general issues in techno-culture – new functioning of space and time, info-subjectivity, new dynamics of cultural production and consumption, and so on - are more important to digital artists and designers than digital art criticism per ce is ultimately very healthy. It means that the people in our field have a keen interest in how computerization affects society and culture at large, rather than just being concerned about the narrow history of their own field. So while we should all be more familiar with this history than we currently are, lets not make it into a fetish.