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Butterfly Catching 2.0?

ByCharlotte Frost

The MIT published *MediaArtHistories*, edited by Oliver Grau, helps further establish the (media) art historical canon. But, writes Charlotte Frost, its success can also be seen as an index of its failure

MediaArtHistories is the first comprehensive survey text on the histories of technological art – a field of practice known broadly as (new) media. In part, the book originates from Refresh!, the first international conference on the histories of media, art, science and technology, which was held at the Banff New Media Institute, Canada, in 2005. I was fortunate enough to attend Refresh! as a poster presenter. My own presentation, a somewhat tongue-in-cheek affair, involved pinning acetate butterflies and typed sheets to my poster board and wafting a hand-held fan around. By doing this, I wanted to demonstrate how established art historical approaches diminish the essential dynamic of (media) art, as Jean Dubuffet has noted:

Considering that, in the domain of art and of the spirit's very spontaneous inclinations, things have freshness and virtue only as long as they are left unnamed, the cultural club, in its eagerness to heavy-handedly name and endorse, fills a function comparable to that of the butterfly catcher. Culture cannot stand butterflies that fly. It knows no rest until it has immobilized and labelled them.[1]

More specifically, I wanted to show how incongruous it can seem to discuss net art mailing lists, as it were, 'off list'. And I wanted to question whether academic conferences and books are really the right locations in which to 'capture' the meaning of such art forms. In short, I wanted to query the viability of 'media art history'.

[IMAGE]

Very Nervous System by David Rokeby

MediaArtHistories does a commendable job of capturing media art and legitimising its history as a distinct field of research. The fact that, finally, Leonardo, MIT Press and Oliver Grau have brought together 21 researchers of various art and technology backgrounds to elucidate the complex history of art and technology is a feat which deserves praise; such a publication is long overdue. The book is presented in four different sections: Origins: Evolution versus Revolution; Machine – Media – Exhibition; Pop Meets Science and Image Science. Rather than representing the emergent discipline of media art history in its entirety, each section of the book represents – perhaps ambitiously wide – slices through its somewhat ungainly mass. Yet each text manages to clearly mark its territory, set its stakes and provide a foundation for further enquiry. The solidity of the arguments and the weight of their unified critical mass make this book an invaluable addition to every art history departmental library – not to mention libraries in science and technology departments. As is always the case, it is possible to list a range of topics and or researchers whose absence is lamentable (take technology and time and a writer such as Charlie Gere for example), but in fact it is extremely impressive that this book collects the ideas of so many leading media arts figures; it would of course be impossible to include everyone.

The fact that *MediaArtHistories* does such a great job of fitting media art into the annals of art history however may also be to its detriment. While it offers an assortment of angles on media art history, I can't help feeling that in so thoroughly assuming the traditional format of art history (i.e. printed text), this book ignores that fact that for some of us at least, the very reason media arts are exciting is precisely because the field aims to trouble established institutions like art galleries, art markets and art history. To me, over all, the book doesn't seem as concerned as it might, with whether or not media art

can and should be historicised alongside other art practice. It barely questions how such a methodological melange – where researchers analyse anything from interactivity to interface culture, and provide examples from periods ranging from the 1200s to the present day – can be assembled in one book. This being the case, I wonder whether a more focused analysis of media art historiography might have provided more insight into the very technologies of media art history itself.

Art history has been greatly determined by technological innovation. Indeed, following the archival theories of Derrida, and Kittler's technologically determined discourse analysis, I would suggest that art history is a product of photography and the printing press/typewriter, while many of today's emergent (as yet undefined) art-interpretive acts are the product of different technological innovations, including the internet. The net art community, for example, has developed, beta'd, populated and opposed a plethora of web-based tools for the contextualisation of net art. Tools such as mailing lists, wikis, blogs, experimental curatorial projects such as Furtherstudio.org, Kurator.org, adaweb, run.me.org or CODeDOC, to mention but a few, indicate a lively scene for innovative media art interpretation, documentation, legitimisation and critique – praxis we might collectively refer to as art historicisation. Yet these activities are seldom cast as viable sources for media art history. Admittedly, such activities occur at a faster pace than we have come to expect of art history, they are created by teams of contributors, rather than written by an individual author and they demand an understanding not just of art, but often of software or code too, yet their supporting role in net art surely recommends them for consideration as media art historical?

Something this book doesn't nominally address, but which I would have been interested to read more about, therefore, is whether such activities might be cast as art historical and how such art-interpretive pursuits, which often have no real meaning for those not actively engaged in their development, might be described or indeed made meaningful beyond their niche? In using old media (a book) and an old discourse network (art history) to convey media art debates, I believe this book treads too softly around one of the main issues integral to (new) media art history (an oxymoron if ever there was one!): the discrepancy between the art we are trying to discuss and the means we have of discussing it. That is, media arts operate on one set of tools, but art history continues to operate on another. For example, an artwork much cited throughout the book, *Very Nervous System*, by David Rokeby, demands levels of interaction from its audience which remain absent in approaches to art history. Likewise, such a work is so much better understood empirically, by an active user – indeed its own document might best be described as its impact on the user. I would suggest that while legitimising media art history, this book does too good a job of legitimising academic, written accounts of media art as the primary format of media art history and not enough to champion emergent contextual endeavours.

Bearing this in mind, essays within *MediaArtHistories* which directly address the practicalities of fitting the round pegs of media art (and indeed of media art histories) into the square holes of art galleries, universities and the canon interested me most and are, I believe, among the most important efforts in media art history to date. In 'The Myth of Immateriality: Presenting and Preserving New Media', Christiane Paul describes how immateriality isn't what is hard for museum environments to deal with so much as the often extremely intricate and expensive material manifestations of media artworks. For example she discusses the variability demonstrated so far in the various installations of *Apartment* by Martin Wattenberg and Marek Walczak. Paul states that media art is often 'more alive than its practitioners want it to be', and sets out many of the oppositions between models which are required to deal with media art and the unaccommodating, existing models operating in art museums.[2] She explains:

New media art in its multiple manifestations has become an important part of contemporary artistic practice that the art world cannot afford to ignore, but accommodating this art form within the institution and 'art system' raises numerous conceptual, philosophical, and practical issues. New media art seems to call for a distributed, 'living' information space that is open to artistic interference – a space for exchange, collaborative creation, and presentation that is transparent and flexible.[3]

She also addresses the changing – rather, blurring – roles of artists, audiences and curators, and implies the same shifts are true for art historians. Gunalan Nadarajan's essay 'Islamic Automation: A Reading of al-Jazari's *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* (1206)', goes still further in demonstrating models developed specifically for art historicisation in his adoption of Foucault's genealogical method. By analysing the discourse surrounding medieval, Islamic 'fine technology' (delicate mechanisms for automation), Nadarajan provides insight into non-western ways of theorising technicity. By discussing automation, for example, as '*a manner of submission* rather than a means of control', he helps uncover a lost history of Islamic technology and interrupt the western stranglehold on existing media art history. Finally, this text begins to demonstrate how art history or discourses in general are themselves dependant on technology.

Other highlights would be Edward Shanken's essay, 'Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method and Firing a Canon', which is useful in plainly stating what is at stake in a technology-less art historical canon. He explains:

The development and use of science and technology by artists always has been and always will be, an integral part of the art-making process. Nonetheless, the canon of Western art history has not placed sufficient emphasis on the centrality of science and technology as co-conspirators, ideational sources, and/or artistic media. Bound up in this problem is the fact that no clearly defined method exists for analysing the role of science and technology in the history of art. In the absence of an established methodology (or constellation of methods) and a comprehensive history that would help clarify the interrelatedness of AST and compel revision, its exclusion or marginality will persist. As a result, many of the artists, artworks, aesthetic theories, institutions, and events that might be established as the keystones and monuments of such a revised history of art will remain relatively unknown to general audiences.[4]

I must admit his emphasis on the value of a media art canon is a little too traditional for me, and his shorthand 'AST' for art, science and technology, although possibly a practical necessity, is also an illustration of how media arts are littered with obfuscating rather than illuminating abbreviations, acronyms and jargon. This contrasts interestingly with W.J.T Mitchell's 'There Are No Visual Media', which proclaims that we might do away with the very category of visual art. In this essay, Mitchell makes a convincing case for the fact that all media are mixed and not actually material-specific (encompassing practice, convention and institution, to mention a few additional elements) and from this vantage point he claims we can problematise 'visual' as a foundational concept of art history. I think this is an approach which offers exciting new possibilities for art historical scholarship, not least because it could be equally well applied to historiography which to my mind also deserves challenging as regards its text and print-weighted informational hierarchy.

Apartment by Martin Wattenberg and Marek Walczak

Apartment - Installation by Martin Wattenberg and Marek Walczak
MediaArtHistories works from the premise that an increasingly unified (and if Edward Shanken is to be believed, powerful) core of researchers (artists, curators, art historians, techies, critics...) have spent

the best part of the last 30 or so years unpacking the ways in which media arts problematise art history. As an introductory reader, therefore, this text would well orient someone in the histories of media arts by demonstrating a cross-section of media art histories and ways in which such histories are being constructed. What it neglects to address is that some existing and emergent media art historical approaches operate in grey areas that so far appear to be beyond the reach of academic essays, or that media art history (in time at least) might not resemble the practice or products of art history as we have come to know them. Where this leaves media art history researchers such as myself isn't clear, but it confirms the longevity of a book like *MediaArtHistories* in suggesting the scope for a follow-up, be it *MediaArtHistories* Volume II or 2.0.

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Footnotes

[1] Jean Dubuffet, *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1986, p.46.

[2] Christiane Paul, 'The Myth of Immateriality: Presenting and Preserving New Media' in Oliver Grau (ed.), *MediaArtHistories*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007, pp.252-253.

[3] *Ibid*, p.251.

[4] Edward A. Shanken, 'Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method and Firing a Canon in Oliver Grau (ed.), *MediaArtHistories*, pp.44-45.

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MediaArtHistories, Oliver Grau (ed.), Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007