Media Appropriation and Explicitation

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a novel characterization of new media art together with an exploration of some key aspects of its practice: I propose that new media art's defining characteristics are media appropriation and explicitation. With media appropriation I refer to the dialectal inscription into the art practice of the knowledge that allows for some particular technological production. I also propose that new media art's language is constructed in part via the explicitation of certain aspects of more 'traditional' art, and that this explicitation allows for a construction of a new vocabulary. Examples of this are the explicitation of randomness, interaction, programming, or of the role that tools and instruments play, among others.

KEYWORDS

New media art; Appropriation; Explicitation; Art Theory.

1 | INTRODUCTION

"Technologies often tend to develop faster than the rhetoric evaluating them, and we are still in the process of developing description for arts using digital technology as a medium—in social, economic, aesthetic respects" (Paul, 2003).

Art using technology as a medium is referred to under a number of names and definitions. *New media art*, *digital art*, *computer art, interactive art*, *art and technology, media arts,* and *electronic art,* are found in the literature and are also used by artists and designers themselves (Tribe, Jana, & Grosenick, 2006).

These definitions are not entirely equivalent. Some of them focus on one defining characteristic of the production (interactive art) while others focus on the

technologies involved (computer art), or are extremely general (art and technology).

The common denominator, which sometimes goes unnoticed, is that they refer to art that uses technology as a medium. Christiane Paul's quote specifies *digital technology* in what becomes an unnecessary restriction. Although it is true that digital technology offers a natural and extremely rich environment for art production, the processes are not confined to any particular *kind* of technology.

New media art's constant evolution both complicates and fosters its study; in effect, there is a large and rich body of literature analysing its practices.

However, in spite of this popularity, there are systematic problems in its characterisation: not only there is an exaggerated focus on the details of the technology involved; but also – the main thesis of this paper – two characteristics that distinguish the area and allow the development of an original artistic language are systematically overlooked or misunderstood. These characteristics are *media appropriation*, and *explicitation*.

The focusing on the specific technology is easy to understand, as the technological components often constitute particularly visible or demanding aspects of the piece. Moreover, when artists themselves attempt to develop an analysing rhetoric, new technologies are often seen as new means of semantic production, and their incorporation can be exhilarating and convey feelings of freedom and empowerment. This has led to an explosion of literature and tools that aim at fuelling this empowerment by socialising some of the needed knowledge.

One example of this would be computer programming. Lately, its appropriation by artists is often referred to as *creative coding*. In the last years a number of books and, more importantly, frameworks and tools, have appeared with the explicit intention of fostering its use by artists and designers (Laurenzo, 2009).

However, the underlying processes of appropriation are fundamentally independent from specific technologies. Even more, as technology is intrinsically mutable, new dynamics systematically appear in the arts that allow for cross-fertilization between technological and artistic realms. In Adamczyk, Hamilton, Twidale, and Bailey (2007) words: 'a reciprocal relationship can be created between the practices of art and science that preserves disciplinary distinctiveness while challenging all participants in the areas where their respective disciplines are weakest'.

In this paper, I refer to the artistic genre of 'technology used as a medium' as *new media art.* Although as mentioned, many definitions have been proposed, mine is succinct: *new media art* is *artistic media appropriation.*

2 | MEDIA APPROPRIATION

Artistic appropriation refers to 'the use of pre–existing objects or images with little transformation' and constitutes a practice often associated with a critique of the notions of originality and authenticity (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2010), the romantic concept of authorship, and of art itself, together with its associated social constructions such as galleries and museums.

Artistic appropriation, perhaps best epitomized by Marcel Duchamp's works *Fountain* (1917) and *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), has played a major role in the artistic production since early 20th century.

This practice, once conceptually disruptive, in new media art 'has become so common that it is almost taken for granted' (Tribe et al., 2006). Digital technologies, with their inherent abilities of reproduction and mutation – after appropriation has been conceptually colonized – have provided an extremely rich playground for both appropriation and recontextualization.

The practices of appropriation frequently come into conflict with copyright law; for example, Jeff Koons's lost trials for copyright infringement (Landes, 2000). This conflict is deepened by digital new media art and its inherent reproducibility.

Among the practices of appropriation art, 'readymades' and 'found art' are examples of the most radical. In them, objects ranging from classic artworks, such as in *L.H.O.O.Q.,* to everyday objects, such as in Michael Craig-Martin's glass of water in *An Oak Tree* (Charnley, Pease, & Colton, 2012), are removed from their context and placed on display in

an art environment with little or no modification (Drucker, 2006).

This artistic practice ignited a radical shift from object to concept; in Duchamp's words a move from 'retinal art', with which he refers to the 'interpretation of the visual world', towards what became known as 'conceptual art' (Drucker, 2006). In Sol LeWitt's words, 'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art' (Kosuth, Guercio, & Lyotard, 1991).

Conceptual art changed forever the conception of art. It implied not a shift from perception to concept but instead an expansion: art became something that, even if it still mostly exists as perceptual stimuli, cannot exist without cognitive reflection. Art can only exist when it talks about art; all art is conceptual, because art can only exist conceptually. As Kosuth et al. (1991) put it, 'being an artist now means to question the nature of art'.

Kosuth et al. also argue that there is no conceptual connection between art and aesthetics and leaves aside the inherent aestheticism of conceptual. I, instead, understand that art requires an aesthetic preoccupation; the artists' conceptual quests always encompass a journey through an aesthetic axis.

George Dickie's (1974) *Institutional Theory of Art*, claims that what defines art is the context in which the work is placed or viewed, while Danto proposed that a piece's status is dependent on the context and its relation to the time and environment in which it was made (Hernsberger, 2006).

> "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (Hernsberger, 2006).

> "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object that it is (in a sense of is other than artistic identification")* (Danto, 1964).

New media art actively reflects on its artworld. It is not that new media art includes a conceptual part, but, instead, that it only exists conceptually. New media art exists on the artistic conceptualization of technological processes and products. Otherwise it would be reduced to a technical exercise, it would become decoration, or engineering (or both: a *decorating engineering* more related to design practices).

Conceptual art conveys the end of art: if art only exists in its self-reflection, if 'art cannot exist outside of art', it follows that art is only art when it becomes something that is not art, or, as Reinhardt put it, 'art is always dead, and a "living" art is a deception' (as cited in Lippard, 1967). Robert Filliou said: 'art is what artists do' (as cited in Kosuth et al., 1991), and I answer: *art is what artists did*. (However, I do agree with Fillou in his charming quasi tautology: "art is… what makes art more interesting" (as cited in Kosuth et al., 1991)).

Even if appropriation has been part of the art practice for over a century, new media art, with its 'intellectual parameters escaping disciplinary boundaries, asserting principles as much aesthetic as technical' (Drucker, 2006), entails an ontologically different kind of appropriation, one that operates on the processes of production instead of, or in addition to, final products.

This appropriation of the processes, which I call *media appropriation*, is a different process than traditional artistic appropriation and constitutes the main characteristic of new media art.

New media artists adopt technology as an artistic *raw medium* by appropriating the *knowledge* that permits the creation of the technological artefacts. In this sense, technology creation becomes (or is able to become) artistic creation: the frontier between technological and artistic production disappears.

This radically expands the landscape of possibilities: artists are not only *users* of technology but also creators, able to question, to subvert, and to escape from the aesthetic and functional premises offered by the technology involved.

Media appropriation constitutes a strategy of empowerment and allows for a symbiotic relationship between art, technology and science, not only blurring their boundaries but also permitting their cross–fertilization.

The appropriation of the processes of technology creation implies the cognitive colonization of *types of*

knowledge production that are new to the art practice. It implies an appropriation of models of reality.

These appropriations are not necessarily related to digital media. It is true that digital media provides a *natural* path for media appropriation, however it is possible to find new media art (i.e. to find media appropriation) that is not digital.

One example of this is provided by *Random Access*, by Korean artist Nam-June Paik. Paik 'stuck more than fifty strips of audio tape to a wall and asked users to "play" the segments by means of a play-back head that Paik had taken out of a reel-to-reel tape deck and wired to a pair of speakers' (Paul, 2003).

This deconstruction of the tape machine conforms a paradigmatic new media art object that appropriates and reclaims the aesthetic dimension of its inner workings creating an interactive art piece. *Random Access* is a piece that *requires* in its conception an appropriation of the tape machine's working principles.

If, as [Graham] Weinbren (1997) said, 'the digital revolution is a revolution of random access', Nam-June Paik's work prefigures a key feature of digital media without being digital.

2.1 REPRESENTATION

Marshal McLuhan's most famous dictum 'the medium is the message' still provides an important tool in the analysing of media. McLuhan (1996) also stated that 'the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph'.

Bolter and Grusin (2000) identify a systematic ekphrasis, which they call 'remediation' – the representation of one medium in another – and argue that it constitutes 'a defining characteristic of the new digital media'.

In effect, it is easy to find 'recurring concepts' in new media art; for example, many Dadaist strategies often reappear, including photomontage, collage, readymades, political action, and performance (Tribe et al., 2006), and it is very clear that Marcel Duchamp (among Cage, Man Ray, Warhol and many others)

prefigured many of the new media art concepts, works, ideas and tendencies.

> *"How one feels about Marcel Duchamp is, essentially, how one feels about a great deal of contemporary art"* (Rush, 2005).

The systematicity of the recurring concepts appears both at a large conceptual scale and at a more concrete, thematic scale.

Jones (2002), for example, identifies the self–portrait as a 'technology of embodiment', in which technology 'not only mediates but produces subjectivities'. The photographic self–portrait of, for example, Claude Cahun in 1939 re–appears systematically in video installations and Web art.

Also showing these recurring concepts, Best and Kellner (1999) state that 'situationist ideas remain an important part of contemporary cultural theory and activism', and argue that Debord's now classic *Theory of the Spectacle*, is still relevant in analysing contemporary society, especially contemporary interactive spectacles.

This reappearance of themes is not, by any means, a new phenomenon. Instead, 'we can identify the same process throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation. A painting by the seventeenth–century artist Pieter Saenredam, a photograph by Edward Weston, and a computer system for virtual reality are different in many important ways, but they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation' (Bolter & Grusin, 2000).

However, the speed with which new media changes, combined with the unspecificity of the digital computer, provide an unprecedented fertile field for remediation and recurring concepts.

The systematicity of this recurrence is related to media appropriation. The inclusion of scientific and technological cognitive frameworks required a systematic revision of the proposals of conceptual art.

If we assume that all art is conceptual, then appropriation *from* conceptual art requires the reviewing of the strategies of knowledge creation *from within* art.

It is intriguing that new media art, a cultural product potentially massive, has had to face so much resistance from both the artistic and technological fields; if a keen interest was to be found in technicians and scientists (although often biased towards the entertainment industry), the artworld of late twentieth century seemed to see new media art as a passing, shallow trend.

It is particularly interesting that according to [Hervé] Fischer (2000), this resistance climaxed after the dawn of avant-garde, which left us facing a crisis where novelty has no intrinsic value, not being anymore a characteristic to look for.

3 | THE DIGITAL COMPUTER

Although the appropriation processes that define new media art are independent of *how* this appropriation occurs, the digital computer offers a natural, extremely powerful, and ubiquitous path of appropriation (up to the point that most of the literature confuses both things: the mechanisms of appropriation with the appropriation itself).

Digital media have been central objects of study in every attempt at understanding new media art. Understandably so, as we are experiencing 'the shift of all of our culture to computer–mediated forms of production, distribution and communication' (Manovich, 2002).

The digital computer's radical novelty resides in its unspecificity. Even though analogue manipulation of, for example, electromagnetic waves can be found as early as late XIX century, (with Tesla's experiments on electricity in 1891), the construction of an electromechanical device for data manipulation, until computers, always existed for a pre-given purpose.

The digital revolution is a revolution of freedom (Laurenzo, 2009).

Even if 'ultimately, every object is about its own materiality, which informs the ways in which it creates meaning' (Paul, 2003), it is needed to sidestep the discussion of "the digitality", to study the artistic language of new media art. I propose that this language has its roots in the phenomenon of *explicitation*.

4 | EXPLICITATION

"Oil painters use a controlled random process (centuries before John Cage made such a big deal about it)" (Perlin, 2002).

It is thanks to the existence of a language of new media art that we can talk about new media artworks without stopping on the technical details of how they were created.

The quote by Perlin describes a specific technology – the use of random processes – being part of art for a long time. However, Perlin accuses Cage of making 'such a big deal about it', under the assumption that Cage focused on *the use* of this technology.

New media art literature often does not notice the fundamental factor of new media art's appropriation, that is, the construction of an artistic language that is *made with* technological production.

In the example, the adoption of a *technology of randomness allows* to *operate in the realm of this technology as an art practice.*

However, *using* a certain new technology does not equal to new media art. For example, the volitional insertion of a process of controlled randomness is not an indicator of new media art. Modern artists such as Mark Rothko or Robert Rauschenberg introduced chance to their process. Rauschenberg, for example, was known to buy paint in unmarked cans at the hardware store (Gambino, 2011).

Rauschenberg's deliberate randomization of the colour choosing process constitutes a reflection on the role that colour plays in painting and within painting.

Quoting Kosuth et al. (1991) again: 'The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to "speak another language" and still make sense in art was Duchamp's first unassisted readymade. With the unassisted readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said'.

New media art *requires* this conceptual migration: it needs to 'speak another language' created by media appropriation.

I have already indicated that many themes of 'traditional' art appear once and again in new media

art. In spite of this, new media art maintains its identity and builds its own original artistic language. One of the main characteristics of this language consists in the incorporation of implicit traits of traditional art into the artistic vocabulary.

Under this light, new media art (partially) is *the art of making explicit*.

The language of new media art comprises the *explicitation* of some characteristics of traditional art. By making them explicit, it becomes possible to *articulate with them*. In terms of a new language, these already existent underlying aspects become constituent parts.

Randomness was an *implicit characteristic* of oil painting. The characteristics of this random process were not part of the art practice: the tool (the paintbrush) is external to the art of painting, and its creation occurs in a conceptually different moment: it is never considered as part of the art creation process.

This shift from implicit to explicit of some characteristics present on traditional art does not only occur with randomness but systematically appears on every interaction between art and technology. Interaction that is as old as art itself, for technology has always played a defining role in art.

In this way, every art practice that requires *tools of art creation* (instruments) establishes a specific relationship with technology. And even if these tools are sometimes created in processes inextricably linked to their particular art practice, they are never considered part of the artworks produced with them.

Luthiers, for example, create musical instruments that transform the artist's gestures into sounds (Jordà, 2004). However, *the construction of a violin is not music.*

Media appropriation always acts as the defining trait of new media art. In this case, the appropriation of the processes and the technology behind the creation of the instruments is able to generate a new artistic path: one where the instrument creation is part of the art production process.

When the luthier's knowledge is artistically appropriated, instruments *composed* by artists

effectively augment the landscape of artistic possibilities.

New media art's systematic appropriation operates as a traversing of the axis implicit-explicit. Many implicit relationships between art and technology, by means of the appropriation, become explicit and therefore they are amenable to become part of the art.

Another example of non-digital new media art is provided by John Cage's 'Instructions on how to prepare a piano'. Here, not only the technology of the instrument is being appropriated and inserted into the artistic performance, but, perhaps more importantly, Cage hints a second appropriation: that of the technology of giving instructions.

5 | PROGRAMMING ART

One of the most common examples of programming in art – in a loose and informal acceptation – is provided by music. In it we have the sheet music: a description on how the art performance should be carried on. Music sheets play a very interesting role within the art taxonomy, for they exist in an intermediate state that is taken out of the art. In effect, the first artistic event occurs at composition time. The composer engages in an art performance that generates a testimony of itself: the music sheet. But the music sheet is never a piece of art, it is a *description* of the art, it exists outside the art, and it is not appreciated as an artwork on itself. If one is found at a museum is it simply as a historical annotation, a reminder, of an artistic event associated with it.

The music sheet then becomes part of a second artistic event: the interpretation of the music. The following of the instructions coded in it, by musicians, to generate a new, disjoint art performance: the music itself.

Instructions on how to carry an artistic performance have been included into the artistic practice long time ago and became a common strategy of conceptual artists. For example, Sol LeWitt 'whose instructions for several series of geometric shapes or detailed line drawings, made directly on the wall surface, sometimes took teams of people days or weeks to execute.' (Boyle, Gonzalez, Johnson, Pau, & Wetterlund, 2006).

Many other important and inspiring examples of instruction-based art are easy to find, among many others John Cage, Yoko Ono, and La Monte Young, were particularly influential.

These all are works of conceptual art, for they are *about* art and the process of art creation, consumption, authorship, and exhibition. They are seminal, inspiring, and moving, but they do not appropriate the *technology of instructions*.

This is another clear example of the process of explicitation that new media art encompasses. These works, however conceptually revolutionary, considered the instructions as something given, something that is not interpellated because it does not belong to the artwork. Its result belongs, its execution, but not its technology, or its design.

Among La Monte Young's 1960 compositions, there is one that is perhaps his best-known artwork. It consists of only one instruction: 'draw a straight line and follow it'. Young is questioning the nature of the instructional paradigm, hinting on its artistic appropriation.

Instructions have a long history; the assignment or delegation of labour is as old as technology itself and every assignment requires instructions, that is, a description of the tasks to be executed.

These instructions can be implicit and codified in tools, or explicit, as a set of oral, written, or drawn directives. One can say that a starter crank, for example, embodied in its affordances the instructions on how to start a car engine.

In the digital realm, giving instructions to a computer is often equal to programming.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of software. As Manovich (2013) puts it, 'software has become our interface to the world, to others, to our memory and our imagination – a universal language through which the world speaks, and a universal engine on which the world runs'.

In effect, in spite of us having been able to identify historical new media processes that are separated from the digitality, nowadays almost all media are digital media, and are manipulated by certain automatic processes.

The digital computer, thanks to software, can be then considered not as a medium, but as a 'meta–medium', 'a combination of existing, new, and yet to be invented media' (Manovich, 2013). This is equivalent to state that new media's appropriation has become an inextricable part of it: we conceptualize the digital *from* its ability to function as an appropriating tool.

The *omnivorousness* of new media art is rooted on its core and is propelled by the ubiquity of software, which acts as a catapulting agent, as a starting point for new appropriations, and very often as the sole technology that enables the appropriation.

6 | THE ART OF INTERACTION

> *"The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."* (Duchamp, 1957)

> *"Since 1969, I have been trying to raise interactivity to the level of an art form as opposed to making art work that happened to be interactive."* Myron Krueger (as cited in Mitchell, 1999)

Marcel Duchamp's quote shows interactive art being a form of explicitation. Every artwork is interactive needing the spectator to complete it, but it is new media art's explicitation what allows interaction itself to become part of the artwork.

Interactivity is not, then, an 'added flavour' of otherwise traditional art. Interactivity's own aesthetics conforms a unique field of artistic production and experimentation. We are not saying that 'the whole is more than the sum of the parts' but that the whole is different, incomparable, it's conceptual centre-of-mass is situated on an orthogonal axis that allows for comparison only in the meta-artistic languages of art analysis' rhetoric.

Explicitly interactive art subverts the traditional conception of the relationship between an *active emitter* and a *passive receiver* that traditional art presents.

Our contemporary conception of explicitly interactive art often requires the computational substratum, for it usually takes the form of computer art. Again, the computer's versatility comes to play a fundamental role, but, also, the historical process of interactive art is inextricably linked to the digitality.

The appropriation of interaction and the exploration of the aesthetics of interaction require to cognitively operate in the verbal dimension of an interaction that unfolds in time. In the words of [Martin] Rieser (2002): '[the art objects] can only become truly interactive when authors attempt to transcend the established syntax of earlier forms and the platitudes of multimedia and invent a coherent artistic language for interaction'.

New media art, then, can be seen as an art practice that requires to operate artistically in the technological realm. Media appropriation results in the creation of new materialities that dialectically construct the art experience.

Coherently, the creation of a rhetoric that analyses new media art requires a discourse that cognitively colonizes the involved technology.

7 I CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented a novel characterization of new media art together with an exploration of some key aspects of its practice. In it, I propose that new media art *is* artistic media appropriation.

With media appropriation I refer to the dialectal inscription *into* the art practice of the knowledge that allows for some particular technological production. Media appropriation implies to cognitively colonise the modes of thought that allowed for the technological creations.

However, in order to construct an analysis of new media art, knowledge of its materiality is needed. New media art's materiality is unspecific, for the art practice occurs when the knowledge crystallized in technological artefacts and processes is appropriated.

The relationship between art and technology is as old as any of them; however, media appropriation transforms technology into a raw medium, allowing for the appearance of *the artistic practice of technology production*.

This practice is by no means tied to the digital; new media art is unspecific on its materiality. Nevertheless, the digital computer became the natural vehicle for new media art, and software evolved into its common denominator.

New media art's relationship with other cultural and artistic genres and methods is, truly to its appropriating nature, one of omnivorousness. As Steve Dietz put it, new media art is 'just like anything else, only different' (as cited in Graham & Cook, 2010).

The difference resides on media appropriation, which generates a qualitative difference in the relationship with the technological substratum, with the artworld, and with the technology production. Effectively, new media art's appropriations subvert many of the assumed stances in the relationship with technology.

An example of this subversion is provided by new media art's reclaiming of the aesthetics of the computer interface.

A long-standing desire of many researchers on Human-Computer Interaction has been the disappearance of the interface. New media art, instead, has many times worked on making the interface *explicit*, on reclaiming it as an aesthetic subject, on creating the art of the interface, or the art of interaction.

This explicitation, I have shown, appears systematically in new media art, and plays a significant role in the creation of new media art's language.

New media art not only adopts technological knowledge, but also makes explicit procedures, technologies, and techniques already present in more traditional art practices. This change from implicit realm to explicit allows for the construction of an artistic language that uses this knowledge.

When Zicarelli says 'I would only observe that in most high profile gigs, failure tends to be far more interesting to the audience than success' (as cited in Cascone, 2000), he is, at least in part, referring to this explicitation. Part of the appeal of the aesthetics of error and glitch resides on they making explicit the underlying technological substrate.

New media art's media appropriation embraces its constant change. Being technology extremely dynamic, new media art, as Ippolito (2008) poses, is 'like a shark' for it 'must keep moving to survive', that is, new media art's condenses itself in artworks of an ever-changing nature.

The defining role of knowledge in new media art is not casual, for new media art is intrinsically conceptual. It is this what converts it into an art genre as opposed to an anecdotal technical exercise.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Tomás Laurenzo is an artist and academic who works with both physical and digital media to explore the artistic construction of meaning and its relation with power and politics. Laurenzo's production spans across different practices, including installation, interactive art, music, live cinema, and digital lutherie. His artworks and performances have been shown in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. He is Assistant Professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong.