Resurrecting the Technological Past

An Introduction to the Archeology of Media Art

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Zoetropes, kinetoscopes, stereoscopes, phonographs, pinball machines, fortune-telling machines, periscopes and guns, household appliances, vintage television sets, even obsolete computers and videogames - the whole repertoire of Old Tech, continuously increased by the speed of technological change, seems to have invaded the art gallery. Visiting a media art exhibition today may feel like visiting a museum of technology - at first sight. However there are, and there should be, differences between a show of contemporary art and an educational display. The meticulously crafted interactive replicas of pre-cinematic devices in places like the Museum of the Moving Image in London, or the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Tokyo, or the inviting multitudes of knobs, handles, joysticks and other interface devices made available for the public at science centers, such as the Exploratorium in San Francisco and La Villette in Paris, may evoke the works created by media artists, both in form and in modus operandi. Significant technological artworks have, in fact, been commissioned by these institutions. Without any doubt, designing an ingenious gadget that will offer the visitor the phenomenological experience of travelling back in time to another technological era and having direct (often tactile) access to an application which has ceased to be part of the everyday experience a long time ago is an important educational goal. It does not, however, automatically warrant the piece the status of art. Something else is required. It is now being provided by "archeologically" inclined media artists. Although artists like Jeffrey Shaw and Toshio Iwai worked in the "archeological idiom" already in the 1980's (and even earlier), the emergence of what I will call the archeological approach in media art has, as a wider aesthetic concern, taken place in the 1990's. Noted artists like Paul De Marinis, Ken Feingold, Lynn Hershman, Perry Hoberman, Michael Naimark, Catherine Richards and Jill Scott, among others, are producing artworks that incorporate explicit references to old analog and mechanical machines as a major aesthetic and structural element of their strategies.

Towards a new Media History

There seems to be a parallel between the emergence of the archeological art and some changes taking place in the cultural and intellectual ambience. The general framework seems to be the gradual displacement of the 1980's "postmodernist" discourse in favour of an approach which once again seeks foothold in "real" space and time. The postmodern era was, it is true, utterly fascinated by roaming (to the point of plundering) the storehouse of history, using it as a source for endless intertextual games with pastiche and references. Yet this kaleidoscopic, self-reflective play tended to efface the historical inscriptions of cultural artefacts rather

than highlight them. History was turned into an ever "reloading" mosaic. Simultaneously, clearly defined subject positions were lost, and the subject was left surfing (either helplessly or victoriously, depending on one's position) in the new postmodern infospace with no clear traffic-signs and without even a reliable system of spatial coordinates. Concepts like up and down, left and right suddenly made sense only in relation to each other, not in relation to any external signpost. What's more, even such a surrogate coordinate system was strangely fluid, in a state of constant transformation. No wonder that concepts, such as "the death of ideology", "the death of the author" and the "death of history" gained such currency. A sign of change has been the new historical awareness in media studies since the late 1980's. Instead of vague theorizing or self-referential language games media scholars have returned to history, analyzing the development of media technology within specific historical and cultural frameworks. It would, however, be misleading to claim that a complete "shift of paradigm" had happened. Rather, the new historicism bears many traces of the preceding wave of postmodern theory, for example its emphasis on discourse and language as agents of history. Consequently, the new media history is less interested in artefacts "as such" than as symptoms of wider cultural, ideological and social phenomena.(1) Media historians have also began to admit that they cannot be free from the webs of ideological discourses surronding them. In this sense history belongs to the present as much as it belongs to the past. It cannot claim an objective status; it can only become conscious of its role as a mediator and a meaning processor operating between the present and the past (and, arguably, the future). The new media history defines itself as a conversational discipline, rather than as a locus for infallible truth.(2) Such an approach could be called media archeological. The way I see it, "media archeology" has two main goals: first, to the study of the cyclically recurring elements and motives underlying and guiding the development of media culture. Second, to the "excavation" of the ways in which these discursive traditions and formulations have been "imprinted" on specific media machines and systems in different historical contexts.(3) Simon Penny's essay "2000 Years of Virtual Reality" is a good example of such a media archeological approach.

The Strategies of Excavation

The strategies adopted by media archeological artists have parallels with those adopted by archeologically oriented researchers. Media archeological artworks could be even seen as a form of spatialized, conversational "historical writing", as a way of maintaining a dialogue with the technological past. To be sure, archeologically oriented artists are very keen on exploring contemporary digital Hi-Tech technologies, as well, but they simultaneously take an interest in using their art as a terrain for confrontations with technology-related ideological issues, such as class, gender, power, the historical nature of vision, and the relationship between high and low culture. Several aesthetic strategies can be perceived. There are works that closely resemble gadgets known from history books - even to the point at which the artwork "asks" to be interpreted as a ready-made or a re-make of an original (allowing us to classify for example Catherine Richards's installation The Virtual Body as a "peep-show machine"). More often, however, the explicit historical reference point is displaced and mixed with other associations. The result

may be a hybrid construction, which transcends the historical referent (without effacing it, however) and presents itself as a deliberately ambiguous spatio-temporal and para-historical object. This is the case with Jeffrey Shaw's classic installation Inventer la terre (1986), or with Paul De Marinis's sound installation The Edison Effect, which continously moves between the past and the present (and arguably the future). There are also archeologically motivated works that do not directly represent a certain gadget from the past, but adopt a more associative, collage-like approach. The theme of Ken Feingold's Childhood/Hot and Cold Wars (The Appearance of Nature) (1993) is the influence of the coming of television in the 1950's on the American collective discursive system of hopes, fears and desires. Feingold has expressed this by combining disparate elements with their own associative potentials (parts of a 1950's suburban home, a replica of the surviving skeleton of the "A-Bomb house" in Hiroshima, a grandfather clock, a large store of 1950's television clips animated by the user by turning a transparent globe, the use of aluminium as the material, etc.) into a "sculpture".(4) Sometimes the archeological work does not evoke the form of Old Tech at all, but uses a contemporary technology as both the terrain and the tool for media archeological excavation. This is the case with the CD-ROM-based artworks produced by Christine Tamblyn (She Loves It, She Loves It Not: Women and Technology, 1993), James Petrillo (Cinema Volta , 1993) and Nobuhiro Shibayama (Muybridge Bio-Morph Encyclopedia, 1994). They present a mixture of personal and poetic reflections, historical material and cultural discourses about technology for the user to excavate.

Time Machines in the Gallery

The gaze of the media artist, earlier directed primarily towards the future, has now been supplanted, or rather supported, by another one which faces the past. This gaze is not motivated by the nostalgia of a techno-buff, or the postmodern transfiguration of the banal apparent in Jeff Koons's "prepared" found appliances. As I try to make clear, I see the activity of this gaze as an attempt to go beyond postmodernism, to initiate a dialogue with the past with the aim of countering the constant blurring of boundaries and definitions which is characteristic of the "postmodern condition" and largely a product of the spreading of audiovisuality. Yet, although the gaze of the media archeologist faces the past it is not fixed; rather, it is extremely mobile. It scans incessantly the historical panorama of technocultural forms, moving back and forth in time, looking for correspondences and points of rupture. In the end it (re)turns to the present, and eventually, the future. Archeological artworks are time-machines, yet their way of functioning is closer to Bergson or Proust than H. G. Wells. The user is invited to travel, but not simply up and down the shaft of time, as if encapsulated in a chronographic elevator. Instead, the traveler navigates in a much more complex realm of past-present and present-past, in which layers of time overlap and associate with each other; the conception of time is cyclical rather than simply linear. These time-machines are not automatic or remote-controlled means of (mass) transportation (like the cinema), but individual "hand-driven" vehicles. The realm they traverse only opens up for the active participant, who is ready to leave one's customary chronological ordering of things, and the safety of his/her own socially and cultural defined observation post,

heading out to explore potential dimensions in a conversational relationship with the work.

Laboratories cum Playgrounds

I have deliberately avoided speaking about an archeological "genre" of media art and resorted to the more neutral concept "approach". By doing so I have underlined the relatively diffuse character of the phenomenon. No manifests have been issued, no groups of artist-archeologists formed, no principles of "media-archeological aesthetics" laid down. The approach itself, in spite of the growing body of work, has received little critical attention so far. There are also individual differences. In the case of artists like Jeffrey Shaw, Toshio Iwai, Lynn Hershman and Michael Naimark the archeological approach has emerged gradually but logically from their long struggles with certain aesthetic and ideological issues. All these artist-archeologists, however, treat gadgets of the past as cultural forms, or as bearers of culturally and socially assigned meanings.(5) I have been trying to think up appropriate metaphors to cover the range of their approaches, coming up with the following: laboratories cum playgrounds, philosophical instruments cum toys, observation towers cum game machines. These metaphors emphasize the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of the undertaking. Archeological artworks establish a terrain for excavation, observation and reflection - but they do so by defining this terrain simultaneously as a playground, children's room or an amusement arcade of a kind. The playful interaction with the work has been designed to entertain, but in ways which should not obscure the critical project in question. It is fun to peer into the doll house -like miniature room inside Lynn Hershman's A Room of One's Own, but the resposes the viewer triggers from a woman (appearing on a screen at the back wall of the "room") cannot be mistaken for the voyeristic pleasures of a commercial peep show (which they are meant to deconstruct and undermine). Playing a self-referential postmodern hide and seek game with the user has lost its appeal.

Combatting Anxiety in the Techno Culture

There are yet other ways to explain the emergence of the archeological approach in media art in the 1990's. Technological art is still looking for its identity, especially in the established fine arts world. Although its history goes back to the early 20th century it is still considered a newcomer, an intruder and an alien. But its position in the "computer world" is not secure either - although technological art is regularly shown at events such as the Siggraph Art Show, it is in constant danger of being treated as just another ingenious application, a technological demonstration without any intrinsic aesthetic and cultural values.(6) In this sense, the artist-archeologists are looking for the roots of their endeavour and simultaneously opting for esteem in the art world. The roots of the archeological approach, however, often seem to lead outside the canon of the "universally accepted" high cultural forms, referring to technologies that have been used for selling illusions and dubitable desires, for entertaining with "canned" sounds and images, or for gambling, killing and cleaning. Although this does not explain the media

archeologist's need to prove his/her cultural viability, it does offer one explanation for the appearance of the archeological approach: in media saturated societies where classical high culture has already lost its foothold for consumerism and popular culture gadgets like the pinball game, the peep show or the Coca-Cola vending machine (already immortalized by the pop-artists) have become part of a value system that serves to give a legitimate foundation for the present. However, ironic celebration of this pop culture is the approach adopted by artists like Jeff Koons or the post-Fluxus Nam June Paik. The case of the media archeologists is somewhat different: their affection for the debris of the machine culture is intertwined with an anxiety and suspicion about the real role that technology is playing in contemporary society. Interactive technology has been marketed as a patent solution for almost any problem in today's postindustrial society. It promises "freedom of choice", "cybersex" or "free flight in cyberspace", which is almost "beyond imagination". A sharp divide is drawn in the media between the "alienating" technologies of the past and the "liberating" technologies of the present. However, one starts suspecting that something is wrong behind these promises. What if the concept of interactivity has been hi-jacked by corporate interests and used to sell more of the same in a newly designed package? The artists have the most effective sensors to register all this. It is not a coincidence that there are so many female artists among the artist-archeologists. Women's historical exclusion from technology and their simultaneous encapsulation or hybridization with the machine (as telephone operators, typists, "automated" housewives etc.) in the male dominated society is enough to raise doubts about the real blessings interactive technology will bring to women, not to say anything about the promised "genderfree zone" of the cyberspace. Many people still believe that the existence of interactive gadgets automatically implies a qualitative change in the human-machine relationship. This is completely false. Interactive technology does not provide more than a frame of opportunities, which has to be filled by specific applications and ideas. Against this background the activity of the artists working in the archeological idiom becomes extremely important. They maintain a dialogue about the nature of interactivity, excavating its forgotten pre-forms and pondering the difference between technology as such and as a cultural form. But by moving cyclically between the past and the present they also contribute to formulating new and hopefully more versatile interfaces and other applications.

Erkki Huhtamo http://www.spark.com/who/ehuhtamo.html
Jeffrey Shaw http://www.spark.com/who/jshaw.html
Ken Feingold http://www.spark.com/gallery95/feingold.html
Lynn Hershman http://www.spark.com/gallery95/america.html
Perry Hoberman http://www.telepresence.com/PEOPLE/PERRY/
http://www.spark.com/gallery95/barcode.html
Catherine Richards http://www.conveyor.com/richards/

Notes

(1) Some of the important contributions to the new media history are: Siegfried Zielinski: Audiovisionen. Kino und Fernsehen als Zwischenspiel in der Geschichte,

Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1989; Friedrich Kittler: Discourse Networks 1800/1900, Translated by Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens, Stanford: Stanford University press, 1990.; Avital Ronell: The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989; Carolyn Marvin: When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; Susan J. Douglas: Inventing American Broadcasting 1899-1922, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; Lynn Spiegel: Make Room for TV. Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992; Cecelia Tichi: Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

(2) Probably the most important influence on such an approach has been the work of Walter Benjamin. See: Susan Buck-Morss: The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989. An extreme example - sometimes to the point of turning non-conversational - is provided by Avital Ronell's The Telephone Book. Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

(3) For a more elaborate discussion of media archeology, see my essay "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd. Towards an Archeology of the Media", ISEA '94 Catalogue, edited by Minna Tarkka, Helsinki: The University of Art and Design, 1994, 130-135. A seminal text for any discussion of media archeology is of course Michel Foucault: The Archaelogy of Knowledge, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, London: Tavistock, 1982.

(4) Feingold has emphasized the personal memories underlying his work: "[...] I have undertaken a search for my childhood TV memories, a kind of archaeology of those images and sounds that I remember, or see now, as having been formative in my understanding of what was going on in the world". Iterations: The New Image, edited by Timothy Druckrey, New York: International Center of Photography and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993, 164.

(5) About the idea of a distinction between technology and cultural forms, see Raymond Williams: Television: Technology and Cultural Form, Glasgow: Fontana, 1979 [1974].

(6) The way artists were treated at the Edge show at Siggraph 94, Orlando, Florida sparked off an intense revolt among the artist community and gave birth to the Sigart list, an international network debate about the problems faced by media artists. About the problematic position of technological art between the art world and the computer world, see my "'It is Interactive - but is it Art?'", Computer Graphics Visual Proceedings, Annual Conference Series, 1993, edited by Thomas E. Linehan, New York: The Associating for Computer Machinery, 1993, 133-135.

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