

# DIGITAL ART AS A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL REALITIES

Jessica Vanam

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Contemporary new media art possibly could play a critical role:

*“in a regime of ubiquitous consumption of content, media art could help augment critically by subverting, disrupting, and revealing the ‘total flow’ of corporate data and by allowing connections and associations to be made where these associations are otherwise denied or obscured. Media art could help recover and ‘augment’ self awareness and the importance of how subjectivity can be undermined or reaffirmed.”*

- Rainer Usselman

Media art is technically an umbrella term encompassing all art that seeks to convey something through a medium; however, the common use of the term refers to contemporary art that is technically focused, or uses modern technology in some way. The media art that Usselman refers to is the latter: a product of digital culture. Digital culture is a result of the convergence of mass media and digital forms to create a “seamless digital landscape”<sup>1</sup>.

Usselman’s claim that new media art’s role could aid in social awareness through the manipulation of subjectivity is parallel to one Lev Manovich’s definitions of new media in his essay entitled “New Media from Borges to HTML”. In a subsection of the essay entitled “New Media as the Encoding of Modernist Avant-Garde; New Media as Metamedia”, Manovich hypothesizes that the avant-garde artists and designers of the 1920’s created a new set of “visual and spatial languages” that are employed in modern communication and computing technologies. For example, the most basic cut and paste function of a computer can be traced to the avant-garde technique of collage, or pull-down menus and HTML tables, which allow for almost an unlimited amount of information through a spatially limited screen, can be traced to El Lissitzky’s use of movable frames.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gere, Charlie. *Digital culture*. London: Reaktion, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Manovich, Lev. "From Borges to HTML." In *The New Media Reader*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

While these examples of historical precedents are mainly technical, the inheritance of form from avant-garde art allows for new media art to produce works that are qualitatively similar. Manovich posits that because of this, new media represents the new avant-garde. However, while the original avant-garde was concerned with creating new representations or perspectives on reality, the new avant-garde is concerned with finding “new ways of accessing and manipulating information”. In the modern seamless digital landscape, or Usselman’s “regime of ubiquitous consumption of content”, media art as the new avant-garde is perfectly situated to uncover and critique aspects of modern culture—including consumerism and corporate culture—through the manipulation of their digital presences.

Three groups that use new media art to challenge and subvert norms and augment social awareness are Survival Research Laboratories, Critical Art Ensemble, and the Institute for Applied Autonomy. Each group’s works are critical of current social structures, and serve to augment both self-awareness and social awareness.

Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) was founded by Mark Pauline in 1987, and has been active since. They are a machine performance art group, and their aim is to redirect the “techniques, tools, and tenets of industry, science, and the military away from their typical manifestations in practicality, product, or warfare”<sup>3</sup>. They stage performances of ritualized interactions among humans, robots, and special effects devices, and all performances contain aspects of socio-political satire.

One performance, entitled *Further Explorations in Lethal Experimentation* was held on October 18, 1997, at the Center for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe, Germany, and the

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<sup>3</sup> About SRL. <http://www.srl.org/about.html>.

Survival Research Laboratories headquarters in San Francisco, USA. *Further Explorations* featured the Air Launcher, a device created by SRL that was capable of targeting and delivering an explosive round within a one mile range. For the performance, the target of the Air Launcher was limited to a smaller range of several technological artifacts and “a few surprises”, and control of the device was delegated to any anonymous online participants who wished to control it. The device was located in SRL’s San Francisco headquarters, and the performance of audience-controlled obliteration was live-streamed online. All operations were remotely controlled and there was no local human intervention. *Further Explorations* explored the topic of remote manipulation and control of lethal mechanical devices. The cybernetic themes of communication and control that the performance explored were predictive of the pervasiveness of telematics in modern technology, from more mundane manifestations (such as text messaging) to more violent and controversial (such as drone technologies).<sup>4</sup>

Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) is a collective of five tactical media artists that was founded in 1987. Their works explore the intersection of art, technology, critical theory, and political activism. A notable piece, entitled *Winning Hearts and Minds (WHaM)*, was presented in dOCUMENTA (13), or d13, a destination art festival with the aim to showcase the current global state of contemporary art. CAE occupied a space located at the margins of the festival, for one hour at noon, for all 100 days of the festival. Inspired by New York City public-access television of the 1990s, CAE issued a public call for proposals to use the space for one day, and received numerous proposals from around the world. Thus, *WHaM* became the site of 100 days of public programming.

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<sup>4</sup> "Further Explorations in Lethal Experimentation." SRL. <http://www.srl.org/shows/zkm/>.

The project was a commentary on the current state of plutocratic institutions that use the label of democracy to sustain their structure. While this theory is obviously a critique of modern western imperialistic practices, it is also applicable to cultural institutions. For example, museums tend to support plutocracy by maintaining collections, which serve as devices to reinforce values parallel to those in the current art market; in additions, major art festivals serve as “corporate alibis for good cultural citizenship”, but often mainly serve to give direction to the development of new cultural products that are used for the profit of these corporations. The democratic alibi of these institutions usually appears in some form of community outreach, public programming, or education program; these programs are usually not well-subsidized by the institutions, are mainly organized around ideals of volunteerism, and are staffed and run by those who genuinely want to create social change. Therefore, the poor subsidize the creation of the democratic alibi of these plutocratic institutions. *WHaM* served to mimic this process, critiquing the very festival is occurred in, through the new media tool of public programming.

The Institute for Applied Autonomy (IAA) was an activist group founded in 1998. The central theme of its work is the creation of contestational robots—one notable example is Little Brother, a robot with “cute” features that distributes activist literature to unsuspecting audiences. The cuteness is tactically-designed aesthetic to make the robot seem non-threatening, and to protect it so it can continue to engage audiences and distribute information. Another robot, called the GraffitiWriter, was used in a project entitled *Rogues Gallery*, in which IAA took the robot to public spaces in Europe and the United States and invited public audiences to spray paint messages on the ground. Although the action was clearly illegal, the use of the robot caused audiences to overcome social norms. This was based in the legitimacy that the robot

conferred—individuals assumed that since the group owned a robot, it must have been affiliated with some kind of research institution with the right to vandalize public space. The *Rogues Gallery* experiments explored the public's perceived differences in boundaries of legality between themselves and those of robots and research institutions, and unveiled the power of the perceived legitimacy of the latter.

Another well-known project of the IAA is i-See, a website that provides visitors with a map of New York City containing the location of all known closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras. The locations were obtained from the NYC Surveillance Camera Project. If the user inputs an origin and a destination location, the map can function to provide a path of least surveillance between the two locations (that is, a route with the least occurrences of CCTV surveillance). The project garnered much attention, and acts as a commentary on the private collection and use of public data, and the state of modern surveillance. The iSee website also details the far-reaching effects of CCTV, and the threats it poses to members of the general public (more specifically, to ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalized groups). It engages proponents of CCTV to respond to its use as a vehicle for social control under the label of greater social security.

Survival Research Labs, Critical Art Ensemble, and the Institute for Applied Autonomy all employ new media techniques to subvert established norms. Some of their works do so in the manner that Usselman predicted--by revealing the presence of corporate or governmental entities and their influence in digital spheres (for example, *I-See*), while others achieved Usselman's predicted outcome of augmenting awareness by employing digital technologies to critique these institutions by uncovering the physical manifestations of their presence--for

example, SRL's *Further Explorations*. These works align with Usselman and Manovich's conception of media art as meta-media--using existing media and media technologies to achieve their "new avant-garde" goals.