

Parallels between photography and new media in relation to contemporary art forms...

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The main purpose of this chapter is to identify similarities between early developments in the history of Photography and later parallel developments in New Media art. There are certain distinctive features common to the development of Photography and New Media as art forms. Both media were initially enthusiastically embraced by the general population as a medium for popular use and enjoyment. But within the field of Fine Arts, Photography (and, more recently, of New Media) questions about authenticity and legitimacy were raised. In other words, art critics have doubted whether Photography could be regarded as a legitimate art discipline when it shares so many interfaces with other more utilitarian image-making means and processes. This same problem of course has also hindered the acceptance and development of New Media as art form given its relation to television, computers and the Internet. Photography and New Media use mechanical and electronic means to convey an image. Both these disciplines have made a huge impact on contemporary communication and culture; they have impacted on art, science, law, politics and travel, and have created new conceptual models in all spheres of life. As Photography became increasingly accessible to the masses, the way in which people perceived the world changed radically. People began to see differently. Photography also opened up links to exotic and inaccessible places and events by producing images of people, places and things never before seen in verifiable form by much of the general population. In the same way, the digital revolution has radically changed our relation to the world by changing the way in which we communicate. The immediacy of New Media has facilitated globalization and translocality, and given people a new perception of the size and accessibility

of the world as a whole. Furthermore, digitality has changed our understanding and perceptions of our bodies, space, the environment, and how we live and fit into such an environment. Photography and New Media also facilitated radical changes on a global basis in the art context - as it had done with regard to communication in general. It is my contention that the inception of the digital revolution - like the perceptual revolution caused by Photography - has irrevocably transformed (1) the way in which we define the nature of art, and (2) the reactions of the masses towards art in general. Not all changes have elicited positive responses. Photography, and now New Media, have interrogated the traditional status of the artist as a creative genius or as a skilled producer of a single work of art. Technological innovations, and the necessary reliance on equipment and machinery for making art of this nature, have called into question the value and authenticity of Photography and New Media as art products and created varying degrees of doubt and uncertainty. The apparent ease of production has also raised new questions about the authenticity and the authority of the art object in general. As with Photography, the New Media exerted a profound influence on the attitudes of the masses towards its products. Walter Benjamin already realized in 1935 the extent to which the mechanical reproduction of art had changed the reactions of the masses toward art. It is arguably, a feature of human nature to react with trepidation, if not aversion, to the new, especially if it is seen to threaten or undermine the known; we tend to uncritically affirm the value of conventions with which we are familiar and which confirm our conventional prejudices (Benjamin, 1935). This is as evident now with regard to the reception of New Media art in the postmodern

context of fine art as it was when Benjamin wrote his prophetic article in 1935. Both Photography and New Media gave rise to various dialectical tensions between art and science. Distinctions between the professional and the amateur, and the creative and 'expressive' as opposed to the 'merely' commercial, were also voiced. Parallels between Photography and New Media with regard to the use and inception of their forms are also apparent; Photography as a vehicle of communication and information might be regarded as the antecedent to recent digital technologies. In art, and in the canons of art history, we have come to accept that certain conventional modes of art production are 'disciplines'. Moreover, as John Tagg argues, within these disciplines (such as, for example, in Painting or Drawing), there is general agreement about what the 'objects' of such disciplines are. Thus, we conventionally accept that drawing is a necessary discipline in the context of the history of cartography. In contrast to this, Tagg notes that Photography, far from being associated with historically sanctioned and respected conventional disciplines, is dependent on the interests that it serves for the construction of its meanings. Thus, Photography in practice, serves a variety of interests, institutions and systems. In the same way, the meanings that attach themselves to New Media art are preceded and legitimated by a vast matrix of global communications and networks, by ideals and the praxis of consumerism, marketing and advertising - as well as by those academic institutions that have accepted the validity of New Media art as an art form. These same category distinctions also inevitably complicate our understanding of New Media art works. Other distinctions also complicate the matter. Complex judicial and legislative instruments also

drove art and mechanics apart (Tagg, 1992: 98). Tagg notes, however, that it was not merely a question of keeping the two different kinds of Photography apart. Further distinctions - for example, between professional and amateur, creative and commercial, expressive and instrumental, and licit and illicit - were made. These same distinctions also affected the status of New Media productions. Tagg remarks: At some point market forces could operate uncontested; while, at another point, a special aesthetic value and cultural status might be secured for certain photographic practices, giving them a peculiar precedence (Tagg, 1992: 99). According to Andrew Darley (2000: 60), it is Marshall McLuhan's dictum, 'The medium is the message', and Jean Baudrillard's notion that it is the character of the form of the medium itself (how it communicates) rather than its contents (what it communicates), that enable us to understand the artistic and other products of the digital age. James Cronk contends that the New Media should be regarded as tools that artists can use to extend their creative scope. While the reproduction of imagery, whether photographic or video, evoked the same controversies that they do now when they first became available, at the same time they multiplied the means for self-expression that became available to artists. Just as the advent of Photography freed the artist from documentation and opened the door for Modernism, mass media imagery has altered the conditions for making art by providing new opportunities for the artist (Cronk by Hershman-Leeson, Ed. 1996). Baudrillard concludes that 'technology, and the various forms that it assumes' perform the function of 'structuring the world directly'. This would mean that various forms of technology have the advantage of being able to mediate our experience of cultural products and

the processes whereby we ascribe meaning to our experience. According to Darley (2000: 60), technology dictates meaning in modern society. He reasons that it is primarily the manipulation of the technological form that 'induces certain relations, experiences and effects', rather than the content of meanings. It is not difficult to see (given the above considerations) why the role of New Media in the art world is both particularly important - and controversial. Because digital images have the power to evoke profound experiences in viewers, and since such images are highly accessible to the most influential sectors of contemporary society, their impact in contemporary society (for better or worse) is incalculable. New Media artworks share the same visual language and many 'borrowed' images with popular culture. Thus, it has become one of the most easily identifiable forms of fine art for the postmodern viewer. Although the development of New Media (like Photography) has been prophetically regarded as a positive development for art in certain circles, it is clear that the inclusion of these media has created many dilemmas for traditional art practice in general. Tagg (1992) observed that Photography represented such a radically new direction in the development of visual technologies that there were no paradigms on which scholars could draw when attempting to define photographic art. This lack of precedent seems to me to apply equally to New Media. What is striking in the earliest articulated responses to the invention and dissemination of Photography is how often the images it began to pour forth are hailed (or, alternatively denounced) as a totally new currency, not only quantitatively but qualitatively different from any previous kind of image production (Tagg, 1992: 122). The controversies and problems

created by Photography were exacerbated when New Media began to make similar claims. While the pre-digital photograph could only be reproduced by way of a negative, and thus printed in editions (a limitation that applied to any graphic process until that time), digital images do not require the original for the production of an exact copy because the original is not distinguishable from any copy that is made from it. It is my contention that the electronic arts are even more disadvantaged than was Photography from the art establishment's unwillingness to accept without reservation the new technological developments that have made these new arts possible. Finally, New Media has had a similar difficulty as has Photography, to be accepted as a fine art medium rather than simply a 'craft'. One might expand the context of the argument advanced above by recalling that Marcel Duchamp also revolutionized the understanding of art when he produced his 'urinal'. In effect, he challenged the conventional view of the art object as a unique, one-off object that was created to be an artwork by appropriating ready-mades. Since then, many issues regarding the value of an artwork have come to the fore. Some of these issues, namely ephemerality, mutability, and the cultural values implicit in an artwork, are radically emphasized by work in New Media. In this regard, Berman artist, Wolf Vostell, notes: Marcel Duchamp has declared readymade objects as art, and the Futurists declared noises as art - it is an important characteristic of my efforts and those of my colleagues to declare as art the total event, comprising noise/object/movement/color/&psychology - a merging of elements, so that life (man) can be art (Vostell by Rush, 1999: 117). The two distinct attitudes that Benjamin identified with regard to Photography posit that its products

have either a popularity value or a value that derives from their exhibition as works of art. This distinction can still be validly applied to New Media art works. When Tagg (1992: 98) reflected on the aspirations for the artistic value of the medium in the early days of Photography, he noted that Photography had not become as integrated into the mainstream of art production - as many practitioners and connoisseurs had hoped it would be. In place of such a development, two distinct strains of Photography had developed. Art Photography occupied rarefied, although strongly disputed, zones of respectability, on the one hand, and industrial and representational Photography became instrumental in promoting the agenda of many of the materialist and commercial interests of modern life on the other. Thus the much hoped for dialectical fusion between that which is both an art and a science never really took hold, and the two distinct definitions of Photography (noted by Tagg) prevail even today. The cult of Art, itself of recent construction, was not displaced. What emerged instead - and it was not just a question of specialization at the level of production - was a decentred field of institutions, practices, agencies and discourses in which photographic technologies were so deployed that what pertained to one space might not pertain to the others at all, and yet in which potential contradictions were contained by being held apart. Already thirty years before Benjamin wrote his analysis, a complex hierarchy of cultural spaces had been set in place in which, contrary to his predictions, a privileged status could not only be retrieved for cultural practices otherwise threatened by the industrialization of Photography, the growth of popular involvement, and the construction of instrumental archives, but could also be extended to selected

practices employing the new technologies of cultural production themselves (Tagg, 1992: 98). Manuel Saiz, a curator of 25 hrs International video show (2003), recalls the tumult that greeted the presentation of Photography as art when similar opposition to video art occurred in the early 1990s. Practitioners of Photography as an art form struggled against having their work designated as a 'craft' when they felt that their work should be accorded the same status as that categorized as 'multidisciplinary' art works. Before that time, Photography had been exhibited separately, and never in galleries together with other art media forms. Photography had its own specialized reviews, its own critics, and its own codes and canons. Even the vocabulary and terminology used by the patrons of this art form were different. Photography was used mainly for documentation and even to create constituent parts of contemporary art works. But it was never treated as an art form with a context in its own right. Artistic structures, particularly in the economic field, had a need to change in order to find a place for these new artistic objects, regarded as such due to the insistence of the artists supplying them to the market, and the interest of the public in contemplating them (though not necessarily in buying them). Most of the conflicts created by the arrival of Photography in the world of contemporary art have been repeated and amplified by the arrival of video. Moreover, video has created its own particular conflicts (Daniel, M & Saiz, M. (Eds). 2003: 13). Fine art and the nature of traditional fine art media, i. e. Painting, Sculpture and Drawing, have always been assessed differently from either craft objects or utilitarian communication media. Without the exclusiveness of materials regarded in traditional art-making, both New Media and Photography were seen as

inappropriate influences in the realm of fine art. Both disciplines were frequently dismissed with the same criticisms and prejudices when they were in their incipient stages because they both included elements of science, technology, popular culture and communication. These connections caused them to be branded as inferior modes of production. Add to this notion the reproducibility of both these disciplines in art, always unattainable in more traditional art forms, and the causes for dissatisfaction and reluctance become clear. While many art experts feel that reproducibility is a positive feature of Photography when it functions as art, they feel that the progress of electronic art is being compromised and retarded by the art world's general reluctance to accept reproducibility as a legitimate feature of electronic art. While Saiz (2003) accepts that the historic parallel between the opposition encountered by Photography and that endured by New Media is valid, he is of the opinion that opposition to electronic arts is even greater than it was to Photography, mainly because of the art world's reluctance to accept reproducibility as a valid and desirable characteristic of an electronic art work. He feels that all these difficulties can ultimately be traced back to issues of authenticity. The ability of traditional unique works of art to attract collectors is based on a certain mystique of the author, and is achieved through the symbolic value acquired by works in contact with the sublime. Works are closely linked to artists, to their flaws and virtues, acquiring through them a certain 'sacred' quality that detaches them from the sphere of commonplace objects. Similarly, the exclusive nature of such objects grants a certain presence to their ownership. In videos, artistic objects are symbolically distanced from their authors as a result of the mediation

imposed by the instruments of production and exhibition; references to the profane world, to television, film and fashion, both as regards technique and language, are constant, and moreover copies are indistinguishable from originals. Consequently, as products, videos do not follow the logic of seduction that collectors find so attractive (Daniel, M & Saiz, M. (Eds). 2003: 23). I would like to argue that the values derived from the uniqueness of art objects need to be reconsidered when we think about Photography and New Media in a contemporary art context. In the case of Printmaking, the convention of editioning individual works has been accepted to solve the problem of value and archiving, and thus it may also be in Photography and New Media art products. Benjamin (1935) argues that reproduction in itself is a valuable and desirable feature of Photography as an art form. He states that it 'freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens' (Benjamin, 1935). Another positive feature that Benjamin notes in this regard is that the lens (by utilizing the techniques of enlargement and slow motion) detects imagery that cannot be seen by the naked eye. The Photograph as reproduction exists in two realms, firstly, as the image uniquely framed on the negative, and, secondly, as the recording of an object such as, for instance, the reproduction of an existing painting like the Mona Lisa. Although the latter type of reproduction certainly eliminates the traditional 'aura' associated with conventional works of art, it reactivates the reproduced object every time the Photograph encounters a new viewer. Thus, although no reproduced or reproducible work of art such as a Photograph possesses a 'unique' existence, it permits the art object to exist

in a unique and intimate way within the contexts of mass contemporary culture. This insight is fundamentally important for understanding the significance and value of New Media art. It is embodied in Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum as an essential quality of any New Media artwork. It would be mistaken to regard the reproducibility of Photography and New Media art as being a factor that prevents these forms of art from qualifying as 'bona fide' art - whatever that mythical beast may be in postmodern times. On the contrary, reproducibility simply becomes another dimension in the digital landscape and fine art medium. Once fine art Photography had become more accepted as a legitimate medium, Benjamin (1935) noted that the inherent qualities of Photography freed art from its distinguishing constraints of ritual. Art-making and definitions of what constituted the making of art were forever changed by the possibilities inherent in the procedures and products of Photography. Sectors of the art world reacted by dismissively branding objects as 'pure art' or something else. In spite of this increasingly sporadic reaction, the rising tides of contemporary culture have become ever more sympathetic (or indifferent) to the issue of reproducibility, and less and less obsessed with the necessity for the 'ritual' that accompanies traditional art. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics (Benjamin, 1935). The 'politics' that Benjamin

refers to includes museum politics and art politics - and it is a 'politics' that directly influences the inclusion of New Media art in current art collections. Questions about the authenticity of New Media objects and their provenance are as critically relevant to New Media art today as were to Photography when people were questioning the credentials and status of Photography as an art form long before 1935. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object (Benjamin, 1935). It has become clear that New Media have transformed what we understand when we talk about 'art' - just as Photography did in its own time. What Benjamin noted about Photography is also true of New Media art forms: the capabilities of mechanical reproduction have also changed the reaction of the masses toward art. To an ever greater degree, the work of art reproduced becomes a work of art specifically designed for reproducibility. Moreover, both Photography and New Media are dependent on the multiple interests they serve for the construction of their meaning. ˇ