Entertainment

Guest Column: The Art and Technology of Understanding

Jamie Allen discusses art's relationship to technology.

JA By Jamie Allen

October 28, 2011, 8:45pm Share Tweet Snap

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Those of us active in the work of art and technology seem a comparatively anxious, self-critical bunch. It has been pointed out elsewhere and often that communities engaged with "new media," "art and technology," and "multimedia" are rife with artist-researchers, craftsman-critics, and technologist-theorists. These people are in the business of simultaneously employing and critiquing the material and social complexes we call "technology" in ways more emphatic than other artistic methods, aesthetics and histories (Criticalengineering.org provides an encouraging and exciting recent example of these kinds of practical motivations). Why all this questioning of form, of motivation, of intention? What's with all the talk of context, architectures and infrastructures? Why continue to bother with the work of fusing and conjoining fields and conventions separated by historical, cultural, and institutional silos, misunderstandings and discords? In short: Why not just relax, and paint yourself a nice watercolour landscape?

Last Laugh

The potential for self-critique and debate in art and technology is no doubt partially the result of important online backchannel-come-mainstream dialogue tools available to all of us, like rhizome.org and artfagcity.com,

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amongst others. But there would seem to be something more going on here—something more deeply rooted in what comes of working with the most current technological media. Within its contemporary milieux, art and technology has something of a singular potential to develop approaches that are simultaneously conceptual and substantial, progressive and genealogical, agglomerative and dissipative. Working with technical medias of representation can make you (at times painfully) aware of their substantiated physicality, while highlighting how our ideas are entangled in the facilitations and restrictions imposed by any assemblage of tools. What results, unwittingly and otherwise, is at best an inspiring intermix of materialism, playful derisiveness and appreciation for historical contingency. An active interest in and awareness of tools and their possibilities is the mark of the artist-technologist. And these are the potentials of an art that maintains a vital counterbalance to the tired pomposity and rhetorics of progress, resonating in other spheres, including our everyday lives in a technological age.

Occupy the internet

Far too often, when an artist makes use of a particular technology, they become the presumed promoters of it. A surface reading reverts quickly to the idea that new aesthetic potentials available through things like software, interaction paradigms or media platforms attract the artist like a proverbial fly to the proverbial excrement. Although there's plenty of work and anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is sometimes true, it's certainly not always the case, and seems less and less so. This misinterpreting of involvement as substantiation, of interest as advocacy, is hackneyed. McLuhan's frustration at interpretations of his early analyses of the media-technological complex develop along the same lines:

> *I am resolutely opposed to all innovation, all change, but I am determined to understand what's happening. Because I don't choose just to sit and let the juggernaut roll over me. Many people seem to think that if you talk about something recent, you're in favor of it. The exact opposite is true in my case. Anything I talk about is almost certainly something I'm resolutely against. And it seems to me the best way to oppose it is to understand it. And then you know where to turn off the buttons.* From *Forward through the Rearview Mirror: Reflections on and by Marshall McLuhan*

Or, more simply put by the consecrated patron saint of art and technology, "I use technology in order to hate it more properly." — Nam June Paik. The inscribed narrative of art and technology shows us that there is often much more to artists' use of technologies than the simple multiplication of faculties or upgrading of techniques.

Nam June Paik – Zen for TV

In the early '00s, one of the mantras of interactive and multimedia art and design was: "It's not about the technology." The orientation and sympathies that this phrase evokes may be helpful, but its simplicity has always felt somewhat misleading. Anyone who's ever written a piece of complex software or laid out and etched a printed circuit board for a piece of creative work understands why. Something doesn't feel quite right about discounting the contribution that these engrossing systems, materials and interfaces make to the work we do. (I am currently in development on a series of works for public digital displays using the programming environment openFrameworks, and so am reminded lately of the way C++ code seems to want to express itself.) Technologies and materials play a significant part in shoring up our thinking, and haunt many aspects of whatever we may call a "final work."

We are also often confronted by the limitations of our own presumed knowledge of whatever material contrivances we happen to be working with. Knowledge is never more than the possibility of further inquiry—in the real world of making things, you only ever learn how to ask more questions. These are the simultaneous closings and openings, analyses and syntheses, a vibrant challenging of techne by episteme and vice versa. It is in doing the work, experiencing experimenting with technology, that we discover this localized, "challenge and response" condition. So we are compelled, generously and hospitably, to acknowledge that it is in fact to an appreciable degree "about the technology."

Recrystalisation Workshops

A most consequential repercussion of this last point is how it reveals the presence of this very same condition in both more traditional arts practices, and in our everyday experience. It may seem that today's intimate interlinking of technology and bodies (think of your in-ear headphones, or pacemaker if you have one) and psyches (think of your relationship with your mobile phone, or how you'd feel if someone deleted your Facebook profile and photos) is unique to our time. Although perhaps pronounced or exacerbated, these conditions are not new—they merely underline our continued desire to reconstitute ourselves in the world, and underline the subjective support provided by the objects and systems that constitute human cultures. In using technologies, particularly in unintended or previously unthought of ways, we become aware of our situatedness within a technological frame. It is such a frame, broadly speaking, that enables the growth of some imaginative possibilities and not others: The frame of language that allows us to think and communicate in words, the technology of drawing that allows us the possibility of a visual art, the computational graphics that allow for dynamic data visualisations, and so forth. Art, design and technological practices are a site of pertinent and engaging expression when they form part of how we seek to understand this, our mediated, material condition.

Experiencing Technology

Sorry

This video does not exist.

Breaking Bad. Season 3 – Episode 6 – Excerpt.

During a third season episode of the American television series Breaking Bad, two otherwise law-abiding, well-educated laboratory chemists discuss how they wound up in the illegal meth-amphetamine production trade. Their discussion recounts the life of an actual professional, academic chemist—dealing with the relative nonsense of faculty meetings, grant writing and university politics. It was partially a longing to get back to the lab, that is to the real "magic" of chemistry, that drew these men to a professional practice of synthesizing of illegal narcotics. To drive this point home—that even highly technoscientific practices are the site of a certain kind of inaccessibility or magic—an excerpt from Whitman's 1855 poem “Leaves of Grass” is recited:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure

them;
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

We should not read this poem as a kind of romantic appeal to avoid bookish learning. The poem instead reminds us that there are many different calls to understanding, many different accesses to knowledge. Some of these involve an experience, or an aesthetic, and any of them can (and perhaps should) at times make you feel sick.

Living in a World We Seek to Understand

In his 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche worries for us that access to experience of "reality," which is brutal, harsh and punishing, will drive us all nuts. The role of art, for Nietzsche, is to act as a kind of gatekeeper, or distribution mechanism. He thought art could provide indirect, metered access to the suffering and disappointments that constitute the reality of human life after the death of God. These are the Greek-come-Nietzschean Apollonian and Dionysian tensions that were deemed necessary to keep humanity and civilization humming along, as Christianity and Romanticism finally extinguished themselves as prevalent doctrines. Science, with its application arm engineering, is for us what brings technology into being. And science has moved even further up the ranks since Nietzsche's day as the most useful and best description of reality we've got. Often artists and designers make it their concern to tackle the reality that science and technology enframe. But we should also be careful not to treat all such confrontations with technoscience as selfsame. Nietzsche, anticipating a progressive criticality akin to the one developed here in a posthumous preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, writes that we must avoid becoming "metaphysically comforted" by a McLuhan-esque narcissism, or otherwise. We should instead "learn the art of comfort in this world."

Free Range Grain (2003)- Critical Art Ensemble

To wrap up the present discussion, we'll take this last comment to demarcate the possibility of a kind of radical materialism of art and technology. Inclination towards "metaphysical comfort," results in what Bruno Latour determines as the unfortunate tendency of both art and science to mistake the presentation for the thing in itself. And if there is one thing that art and design practices may be able to offer us, it is opportunities for materials and technologies to presence themselves, most directly—looking up in silence at the stars. This takes place with an awareness that artistic investigation should lead to ever more questioning and critique; that it can present in the same object, moment or experience both a lack and an opportunity. This is the possibility of "living in a world we seek to understand," where seeking describes the work of art and technology, always yet to be done.

How Does Anyone Ever Get Anything Done Around Here (still)

Jamie Allen makes things with his head and hands. He is a Canadian-born artist-researcher whose work has been featured for-real and in print internationally, and who writes much less than he'd like to on topics related to his practice. He has worked with a number of excellent art-and-technology organisations, including Eyebeam, ITP, STEIM and FACT (UK). For the past three years he has been helping direct the activities of Culture Lab (UK), a University center for creative interdisciplinary research and projects. He is co-founder and Co-Editor of the interdisciplinary, multimedia journal continent. In 2012, Jamie will relocate to Denmark to head up research activities at the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design.

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