

EDWARD A.
SHANKEN

**ALTERNATIVE
«NOWS» AND
«THENS» TO BE**

History is nothing but a pack of tricks that we play on the dead.

– Voltaire

The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice.

– Mark Twain

History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.

– Winston Churchill

The best way to predict the future is to invent it.

– Alan Kay

I take the theme “alternative now” as being concerned not just with the present but as cutting right to the core of the philosophy of history. Without denying the facticity of actual events, the malleability of history is demonstrated by the many ways the canon of art history has been written and rewritten from the perspectives of ever-changing present. But this is also a two-way street. Just as every “now” arguably constructs an alternative “then”, so every “then” constructs an alternative “now”. Moreover, every alternative “now” and “then” establishes a particular foundation for imagining the future. This inevitably impacts the “nows” and “thens” to be; those that are yet to come.

My scholarship has been deeply concerned with writing and re-writing the history of art. Academic writing in the humanities is predicated on a simple formula: 1) identify a problem; 2) discuss what other people have said about that problem; 3) articulate your own original perspective and argue in support of it. Coming up with an original perspective that is compelling – even just to oneself – can seem like a gift from the gods. Even if so blessed, convincing others that one’s position is worth considering can be an extraordinary challenge, one that is proportional to how far it diverges from the status quo. But this is precisely what is required to influence people; in effect, to alter history.

So why bother? Others’ ideas expand my understanding of the world, making my life more meaningful and, well, awesome, in the most literal sense. By creating and sharing ideas I hope to have the same effect on others. My idealism goes even further, for I believe this process helps cultivate a more peaceful world. If we know more, are open to alternative world views, and can understand others’ perspectives, then perhaps we can be more sensitive, tolerant and embracing of others. The more we can embrace other individuals and

cultures, the more difficult it becomes to destroy them and the greater our motivation becomes to reconcile our differences in a mutually beneficial way. Although I can find little tangible evidence to support this belief, my commitment to it was reinforced when I heard a very similar position expressed by the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Philippe de Montebello in 2007.

In what follows, I shall outline some of the rhetorical strategies I have employed in my own attempts at rewriting history. A key example from my current research on bridging the gap between mainstream contemporary art and new media art will be elaborated and analyzed in terms of its implications. Finally, I shall raise some provocations regarding the potential significance of particular local histories for informing alternative accounts of the past and present.

One of my strategies for historical revision concerns questioning categorical divisions that obscure parallels and continuities. Although it is important to make distinctions, lest everything all be an undifferentiated muddle, distinctions, boundaries, definitions and the like must be scrutinized with respect to their ideology and the violence they do to the people, places and ideas involved. As sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn has written, “Boundary-work is strategic practical action [...] Borders and territories [...] will be drawn to pursue immediate goals and interests [...] and to appeal to the goals and interests of audiences and stakeholders”. Quoting Pierre Bourdieu, Gieryn further notes that such boundaries constitute “ideological strategies and epistemological positions whereby agents [...] aim to justify their own position and the strategies they use to maintain or improve it, while at the same time discrediting the holders of the opposing position and strategies.”¹

Such thinking informed my essay “Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art”,² which questions the sharp categorical distinctions that art historians have drawn between “conceptual art” and “art and technology”. I analyze some of the ideological factors underlying the historicization of these practices as discrete. I argue that cybernetics, information theory, and systems theory are foundational theoretical models that, in combination with the advent of digital computing and telecommunications, have played a significant role in shaping culture since 1945. By interpreting both conceptual art and art and technology as reflections and constituents of broad social and

economic transformations during the information age, I conclude that the two tendencies share important similarities, and that this common ground offers useful insights into a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary art. An essay like this does not aspire to win the Nobel Prize for Peace. But I do think its implications extend beyond the particular debates pertaining to conceptual art, art and technology, or contemporary art more generally. If my work, and that of other intellectuals, can offer a model for successfully questioning and thinking across categorical boundaries, and if it can help others do the same, then perhaps it can contribute to advancing larger idealistic goals.

As a scholar whose research and teaching focus on the entwinement of art, science and technology, with a focus on new media and visual culture, I have been frustrated by the exclusion of my specialized field from the art historical canon and particularly from mainstream contemporary art history. In *Art Since 1900* (2004), a canonical text on modern and contemporary art, authors Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh are so ignorant of or antagonistic to any sort of art that happens to use technological media that even the most major monuments in the discourses of media art history, such as Billy Klüver and E.A.T., are ignored. My recent book *Art and Electronic Media*, which amounts to a canonical history of this specialized field, attempts to enable the rich genealogy of art and technology in the 20th century to be understood and seen – literally and figuratively – not just as a quirky and marginal activity, but as central to the histories of art, media and visual culture.⁵ To this end, my approach joins traditional art historical methods with media archeology and new media theory. In keeping with my commitment to challenge conventionalized boundaries, the book highlights continuities across periods, genres and media, and includes the work of artists, designers, engineers and institutions from more than thirty countries. Blue-chip contemporary artists such as Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer and Olafur Eliasson are seamlessly joined with major figures in new media art, such as Roy Ascott, Lynn Hershman and Stelarc. Again, no peace prizes in sight, but if the book can help shake off prejudices against the explicit use of technological media in and as art, then perhaps some headway will have been made.

My current research even more directly attempts to bridge the gap between what I call mainstream contemporary art (MCA) and new media art (NMA). Each has much to offer the other. My goal is to forge a hybrid discourse that joins the best of both worlds, informing each other in a way that is mutually beneficial and fortuitous for art in general. While this merging of NMA and MCA is perhaps inevitable, proactively theorizing the issues and stakes involved may play an important role in informing the ways in which that merger unfolds. Indeed, of the reception of this formerly new medium, John Tagg has noted that the more experimental aspects of photography were not well assimilated, while the impact of the discourses of photography and contemporary art on each other was highly asymmetrical: the latter changed very little, while the former lost its edge in the process of “fitting in”.⁴ Ji-hoon Kim has further observed that despite the extraordinary assimilation of video by MCA, much experimental film and video, particularly the sort of material championed by Gene Youngblood in *Expanded Cinema* (1970) and its progeny, has been excluded from mainstream museum shows, while being celebrated in exhibitions held in new media contexts.⁵ Needless to say, many in the NMA community are wary of losing our edge in the process of assimilation.

For Art Basel in June 2011, I organized and chaired a panel discussion with Nicolas Bourriaud, Peter Weibel, and Michael Joaquin Grey, under the rubric “Contemporary Art and New Media: Toward a Hybrid Discourse?”⁶ That occasion demonstrated some challenges to bridging the gap between MCA and NMA. One simple but clear indication of this disconnect was the fact that Weibel, arguably the most powerful individual in the world of NMA, and Bourriaud, arguably the most influential curator and theorist in the world of MCA, had never met before. Although I see significant parallels and overlaps between MCA and NMA (as do other theorists and curators), these worlds do not see eye-to-eye, no matter how much they may share the rhetoric of interactivity, participation and avant-gardism. Part of the challenge to reconciling these discourses may be related to the different historical narratives they adhere to and the divergent presents that are affirmed by them. I will argue that a narrative of contemporary art in which new media is a central component demands a different history that includes a reappraisal of key monuments.

Citing the example of photography and Impressionism, Bourriaud has argued that the influences of technological media on art are most insightfully and effectively presented indirectly, eg., in non-technological works. As he wrote in *Relational Aesthetics*, “The most fruitful thinking [explored] the possibilities offered by new tools, but without representing them as techniques. Degas and Monet thus produced a photographic way of thinking that went well beyond the shots of their contemporaries.”⁷ On one hand, I agree that the metaphorical implications of technologies have important effects on perception, consciousness, and the construction of knowledge and ways of being.⁸ But on the other hand, this position exemplifies the historical, ongoing resistance of mainstream contemporary art to recognize and accept emerging media, a prejudice that demands careful scrutiny. Moreover, the implicit/explicit dichotomy that Bourriaud constructs serves only as a rhetorical device to elevate the former member of the pair – the lofty, theoretical ideal – at the expense of the latter – the quotidian, practical tool. This binary logic must be challenged and its artifice and ideological aims deconstructed, in order to recognize the inseparability of artists, artworks, tools, techniques, concepts and concretions as actors in a network of signification.

Photography, initially excluded from the pale of bona fide forms of fine art practice, became a central aspect of mainstream contemporary art practice a century later. This occurred not simply because photography was relatively unaccomplished compared to painting during the heyday of Impressionism (1874–86). Rather, the acceptance of photography was delayed primarily because of the rigid constrictions of the prevailing discourses of late 19th- and early 20th-century art, which were unable to see beyond the mechanical procedures and chemical surfaces of the medium and recognize the valuable contributions it had to offer MCA of the time. Half a century later, photography made a triumphant entrance into the Museum of Modern Art in New York, but it remained a poor relation in comparison to painting and sculpture in the context of the medium-specific prejudices of modernist esthetics for another fifty years. By the 1980s, changes in the discourses of MCA, collector attitudes and market conditions, and the practice of photography itself, resulted in the medium’s warm embrace by MCA (though not as photography

per se, but as art that happened to be a photograph), and it became highly collectible – and expensive – as exemplified by the work of Cindy Sherman. The same could be said of video, equally shunned at the moment of its emergence in the 1960s and now the darling of MCA curators. Inevitably, new media and the longer history of electronic art will be recognized by MCA as well, once a potential market for it is recognized and promoted.

Bourriaud's argument authorizes a particular history of photography aligned with a conventional history of art, in which technological media remain absent from the canon. A history of art that accepts, if not valorizes, the explicit use of technological media, as in kinetic art and new media, will reconsider its precursors. In this scenario, one can imagine an alternative history of photography that celebrates the chronophotographic practices of Eadweard Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey and Thomas Eakins concurrent with Impressionism. Such a history will recognize that such work consists not just of the images produced, but of the complex and inextricable amalgam of theories, technologies and techniques devised in order to explore perception. It will recognize as well the substantial transit of ideas between art and science (Marey was a successful scientist whose work influenced Muybridge, who later collaborated Eakins, the latter two being artists deeply concerned with biomechanics.) The important artistic, scientific and hybrid art-science research of these pioneers will be seen, moreover, as key monuments in and of themselves, not just as metaphorical inspirations for their contemporaries working with oil and canvas, as Bourriaud suggests. It took decades, in fact, for these chronophotographic discoveries (to say nothing of the advent of cinema) to penetrate painters' and sculptors' studios. And when it did, it infected art with both implied and explicit motion and duration, as in the work of Duchamp, Gabo, Wilfred, Boccioni and Moholy-Nagy in the 1910s and 1920s, often explicitly incorporating technological media.

Bourriaud's comparison of photography during the Impressionist era with computers and computer networking now is troubling for further reasons. The Eighth (and final) Impressionist Exhibition in 1886 predates the introduction of Kodak #1 camera (1888), prior to which the practice of photography was limited to professionals and elite amateurs. By contrast, new media started becoming a widespread,

popular phenomenon by the mid-1990s, with the advent of the web (1993) occurring five years prior to the publication of *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998 (the same year that email became a Hollywood trope in *You've Got Mail*.) Moreover, since 1890, photography and its extensions in cinema and television radically altered visual culture, saturating it with images. The context of image production and consumption during the Impressionist era – and its impact on art – simply cannot be compared with how the image economy since the late 1990s has impacted art (to say nothing of how key artistic tendencies since the 1960s strategically shifted focus away from imago-centric discourses). This is especially true since the advent of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, when new media tools and corresponding behaviors transformed the landscape of cultural production and distribution: Social media sites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter now compete with search engines like Google and Yahoo for popularity; “prosumer” is a marketing term; and critics debate whether the internet is killing culture or enabling powerful new forms of creativity.⁹

Bourriaud's position is, moreover, at odds with the actuality of what he writes about. For if he genuinely embraces the so-called “post-medium condition” as he suggested at Art Basel, then the exclusionary prejudice against the use of technological media in and as art would not exist. The curator would not favor indirect influences of technology on art. His discussions and exhibitions of contemporary art would be blind to medium, and there would be nothing to argue about. But that is not the case. Peter Weibel astutely picked up on Bourriaud's distinction between direct/indirect influences and pointed out the hypocrisy of valuing the indirect influence of technology while ignoring the direct use of technology as an artistic medium in its own right. Weibel accurately and provocatively labels this “media injustice”.

If we look back over the preceding paragraphs and analyze not just what I have claimed but how I have made those claims, it will be clear that my argument deploys several strategies. The institutional critique offers insights into alternative histories that refuse to accept museological or market criteria as a yardstick for artistic merit. The interrogation of the implicit/explicit dichotomy challenges the epistemological foundations of Bourriaud's position and reveals it as a rhetorical strategy in support of an ideological agenda. Removing that

prejudice, pervasive in the history of art, at once opens up an alternative history of photography and admits the explicit use of technological media in mainstream contemporary art. Indeed, I have maintained that a revised history authorizes (and demands) rewriting the present just as the revised present authorizes (and demands) rewriting history. But on a metacritical level, beyond the limited debates of art history, to create awareness of and to erode an epistemology based on binary oppositions might sow revolutionary seeds for writing alternative histories and envisioning alternative futures.

I come to this debate from the perspective of an “other”: an advocate for the NMA underdog, one whose own work has not been readily acknowledged by MCA. Yet the Polish context of WRO 2011 makes me self-conscious of my status as a Western scholar, trained and working in the US and the Netherlands, and in this regard hardly an “other”. Although in many respects the artworlds of both MCA and NMA are globally inclusive, many potential alternative histories are locally particular. These local histories, especially those related to underground activities that respond to specific and extreme social and cultural exigencies, can offer important insights into humanity and the diverse ways it is expressed in art. Without romanticizing plight as a driver of creativity, when artists are pushed to their limits as part of a shared trauma, the outcomes of such circumstances have the potential to offer profound insights into aspects of individual and collective experience that lie outside the comfort zone of most artworld denizens.¹⁰ In this regard, the recent publication by the WRO Art Center of *The Hidden Decade: Polish Video Art 1985–95* is a vital document, revealing to international audiences a critical moment in the exploration of video by artists working in Poland immediately following the grim period of martial law (December 13th, 1981–July 1983) and amidst the transition following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the former USSR.¹¹ Piotr Krajewski notes that during roughly the first half of that decade, alternative groups like Attic [Strych] developed collective approaches later known as Chip-in Culture. In response to what artist Józef Robakowski described as “the awful hopelessness of the situation”, in which “our dignity was being destroyed”, their films constituted an “unambiguous [...] categorical battle cry for freedom”, and their activities, described by Krajewski, were “outrageous, hedonistic and (self-)destructive”.¹² By

contrast, the artists who came of age later did not experience martial law as a “seriously life-changing event”, so instead of rebelling against “ideological pressure of a political variety”, they interrogated “the new pressure of mass culture”, simultaneously fascinated with and critical of “consumerism and culture as a commodity”.¹³

Although the ascent of video art in the MCA artworld began occurring during that decade, few of the artists mentioned in *The Hidden Decade* have gained renown outside of Poland. A notable exception is Katarzyna Kozyra, who graduated from the Warsaw Art Academy in 1993 and burst on the international scene at the 1999 Venice Biennale. This leads me to wonder how the history of Polish video from 1985–1995 can inform the discourses of NMA and MCA. What can artists both inside and outside of Poland learn about art, individual and collective production, and ideological and cultural resistance from this particular local history? How might this history enter and alter the canons of video art in particular and contemporary art in general? What challenges might it pose to dominant epistemological models? What alternative histories and futures to be does it portend?

KEYWORDS: ARTISTIC CANONS, ART AND SCIENCE, ART AND TECHNOLOGY, ART AND IDEOLOGY, MAIN TRENDS IN MODERN ART, MEDIA ART

- 1 Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 23.
- 2 First published in SIGGRAPH 2001: *Electronic Art and Animation Catalog*. New York: ACM SIGGRAPH, 2001, pp. 8–15; expanded in *Art Inquiry* 3(12) 2001, pp. 7–33 and *Leonardo* 35(4) 2002, pp. 433–38.
- 3 Edward A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media*. London: Phaidon Press, 2009. For more on canonicity and the history of art and technology, see my “Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method, Firing a Canon”. In: O. Grau, ed. *Media Art Histories*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007, pp. 43–70.
- 4 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993.
- 5 Ji-Hoon Kim, “The Post-Medium Condition and the Explosion of Cinema”. *Screen* 50(1) 2009, pp. 114–23.
- 6 A video recording of the event can be found on the Art Basel website. See: <http://www.art.ch/go/id/mhv>.
- 7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002, p. 67.
- 8 This was a key point in my essay “Tele-Agency: Telematics, Telerobotics, and the Art of Meaning”. *Art Journal* 59(2) 2000, pp. 64–77.
- 9 See, for example, Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet Is Killing Our Culture*. New York: Crown Business, 2007; and Clay Shirkey, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin, 2008.
- 10 For more on art and cultural trauma, see Kristine Stiles, “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma”. *Stratégie II: Peuples Méditerranéens* 64–65 (July–December) 1993, pp. 95–117.
- 11 Piotr Krajewski and Violetta Kutlubasis-Krajewska, eds., *The Hidden Decade: Polish Video Art 1985–95*. Wrocław: WRO Art Center, 2010.
- 12 Piotr Krajewski, *The Hidden Decade: An Outline of the History of Polish Video Art 1985–1995*, trans. Sherill Howard-Pociecha. In: P. Krajewski and V. Kutlubasis-Krajewska, eds., pp. 174–75.
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 180.

Edward A. Shanken
Alternatywne teraz, zaraz i przedtem

Temat „alternative now” odnosi się nie tylko do terażniejszości; uważam, że ściśle dotyczy on samego sedna filozofii historii. Nawet bez kwestionowania faktów historia potrafi wykazać ogromną plastyczność. Sposób, w jaki kanon historii sztuki jest ujmowany i kształtowany, zależy od perspektywy wiecznie zmieniającego się teraz. Ten mechanizm działa w obie strony: tak jak każde „teraz” zakłada konstrukcję alternatywnego „wtedy”, tak każde „wtedy” konstruuje alternatywne „teraz”. Co więcej, wszystkie alternatywne „teraz” i „wtedy” stają się szczególną podstawą wyobrażenia przyszłości. Te oddziaływania „byłego” i „teraźniejszego” są nieuchronne zarówno teraz, jak i w przyszłości.

Przedmiotem moich studiów jest opisywanie lub pisanie na nowo historii sztuki. W naukach humanistycznych pisanie opiera się na prostych zasadach: 1) rozpoznanie problemu; 2) omówienie tego, co inni napisali na jego temat; 3) wyłożenie swojego punktu widzenia wraz z uzasadnieniem. Wystąpienie z oryginalnym ujęciem, frapującym – choćby tylko dla autora – jest jak dar bogów. Jednak nawet ktoś tak obdarowany, przekonując innych do swego stanowiska, musi wziąć pod uwagę, jak dalece odbiega ono od obowiązującego *status quo*. I to jest dokładnie to, czego potrzeba, by wpłynąć na ludzi, a w konsekwencji także by odmienić historię.

Czym się więc przejmować? Idee innych poszerzają moje rozumienie świata, czynią moje życie sensowniejszym, głębszym. Tworząc i dzieląc się ideami mam nadzieję oddziaływać w ten sam sposób na innych. Mój idealizm idzie nawet dalej – wierzę, że ten proces służy naprawie świata. Jeśli więcej wiemy, otwieramy się na odmienne poglądy i próbujemy zrozumieć inne stanowiska, być może stajemy się bardziej wrażliwi, bardziej tolerancyjni wobec innych. Im bardziej jesteśmy gotowi przyjmować inność, odmienne kultury, tym większą mamy motywację do łagodzenia różnic. Moja wiara w to została umocniona, gdy w 2007 roku okazało się, że podobny pogląd wyznaje były dyrektor Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe de Montebello.

W swoim artykule przedstawiam plan, według którego podejmuję próbę skorygowania historii. Wyściowy temat moich obecnych badań – budowanie pomostu między sztuką głównego nurtu a sztuką nowych mediów – traktuję w kontekście ich wzajemnych wpływów. Na końcu wprowadzam nieco prowokacji na temat potencjalnego znaczenia konkretnej historii lokalnej dla alternatywnych opisów przeszłości i teraźniejszości.

Jedna z moich strategii historycznej rewizji kwestionuje katagoryczne podziały, które nie pozwalają dostrzec podobieństw i kontynuacji. Jakkolwiek zaznaczanie odrębności jest ważne, inaczej wszystko stałoby się jednolitą magmą, różnice, granice, definicje muszą być badane z uwzględnieniem miejsca, w jakim powstają, ideologii, jakiej są poddane, i presji, jaką stwarzają. Socjolog Thomas F. Gieryn pisał: *Tworzenie podziałów jest strategicznym działaniem [...]. Granice i terytoria [...] są wyznaczane dla osiągnięcia doraźnych celów i interesów [...] żeby zabezpieczyć potrzeby i interesy grupy bezpośrednio zainteresowanej*¹. Cytując Pierre'a Bourdieu, Gieryn zauważa dalej, że takie granice ustanawiają „ideologiczne strategie i epistemologiczne stanowiska, według których ich wyznawcy [...] usprawiedliwiają swoje stanowisko i strategie używane do utrzymywania albo ulepszania go, dyskredytują przy tym wyznawców przeciwnych stanowisk i strategii”¹.

Artykuł po raz pierwszy został opublikowany w katalogu WRO 2011, Wro Art Center.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: **KANON SZTUKI, SZTUKA I NAUKA, SZTUKA I TECHNOLOGIA, SZTUKA I IDEOLOGIA, GŁÓWNE NURTY SZTUKI WSPÓŁCZESNEJ, SZTUKA MEDIÓW**

¹ Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999, s. 23.

Edward A. Shanken
Alternative «Nows» and «Thens» to Be

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embrace other individuals and cultures, the more difficult it becomes to destroy them and the greater our motivation becomes to reconcile our differences in a mutually beneficial way. Although I can find little tangible evidence to support this belief, my commitment to it was reinforced when I heard a very similar position expressed by the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Philippe de Montebello in 2007.

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¹ Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 25.