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Contemplative Immersion: Benjamin, Adorno & Media Art Criticism
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The aesthetic theories of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno are hardly an obvious place to begin a discussion around contemporary media art criticism. However, their different approaches offer an unexpected insight into the *immersive* character of media art. Thus, in this paper I seek to make an intervention into the criticism of media art, and more broadly the post-media character of contemporary art practice. In particular, I want to consider how "critical distance" may be possible in the face of "virtual art." That is, under circumstances in which traditional medium-specific criteria for judgement are largely irrelevant, I want to consider the contribution that Benjamin and Adorno's writings can make to media art criticismtoday. My purpose is not to address specific artworks in detail. Nor is it to explore which aspects of contemporary media art are inherited from earlier media. Rather, I want to return to a central trope of aesthetics, the notion of contemplation itself, and, more specifically, the now outmoded and seemingly paradoxical idea of "contemplative immersion." Benjamin and Adorno's discussion on this topic, I suggest, continues to have something to offer to contemporary debates around the assumed collapse of critical distance in the encounter with digital media art.

The Aesthetic Image Space: Immersion and the Virtual

> With the advent of new techniques for generating, distributing and presenting images, the computer has transformed the image and now suggests that it is possible to enter it. (Popper 3)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *immersion* as the action of immerging or immersing, with particular reference to water or other liquids. Associations to cleansing and Christian baptism also surround the word. But immersion equally relates to a state of intellectual absorption in an action or condition. We might say, for instance, that we are immersed in a novel. Immersion here is characterised by "diminishing critical distance from what is shown and increasing emotional investment in what is happening" (Popper 180). Already we can note a binary between criticality and emotion corresponding to a spatial distinction between distance and nearness. There is a close connection here with the concept of the *virtual*, brought into common usage through the hype around the notion of "virtual reality" in the 1990s. Characterised by the potential for disembodied exploration of alternative realities, the notion of virtual reality suggests a form of simulation, often involving multiple senses. More broadly, the virtual may be conceived not in opposition to the real, but as a potential that may be realised as many different actualities. But there is something uncanny about the aesthetics of the virtual. As Marie-Laure Ryan suggests, "virtual reality" pulls in a different direction than the ideal of *narrative* immersion established in the nineteenth-century novel. Virtual reality seeks to immerse participants so that they cannot distinguish between virtual and everyday reality.

As Oliver Grau and others have shown, the concept of immersion has a long history in Western visual culture (Grau *Virtual Art*). Grau traces an archaeology of "immersive" image spaces, in particular those that seek to enclose viewers within the fabric of the image itself. The immersive totality of the panorama is shown to be central to the prehistory of contemporary virtual media technologies. In addition, notions of interactivity and virtuality were already well established by the 1960s, when viewer participation in the construction of art first began to play a considerable role. In works associated with happenings, Fluxus and avant-garde performance art, the erstwhile autonomous object of painting and sculpture was giving way to the explicit integration of the audience. From this perspective, op art and kinetic art – extending back to Marcel Duchamp's *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)* (1920), which require the viewer to turn on the optical machine and stand one metre away – can be viewed as a means to activate perceptual experiences in which the viewer is now a crucial factor. Max Ernst, who, like Duchamp, became involved with the European Dada movement, introduced the possibility of literal, physical participation in an artwork in 1920 when he placed an axe next to one of his works, to be used by the visitor if they did not like the object (Dinkla). And as Peter Weibel has recently shown, in reference to Naum Gabo's kinetic constructions, already in the 1920s the term "virtual" was beginning to replace the term "illusory" (Weibel 31). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, many pioneers in digital art began with kinetic art, and often continue to incorporate some of its features. Jeffrey Shaw, for instance, continues to use movement in his virtual environments such as *Virtual Museum* (1991) and *The Golden Calf* (1994) (see www.jeffrey-shaw.net). *The Golden Calf* comprises a small monitor on a pedestal, on which when lifted a calf comes into view, set upon a virtual pedestal that resembles the real one. By moving the monitor around the actual pedestal the viewer can examine this golden calf from above and below and all sides.

In relation to digital art, the term immersion tends to refer to work that not only requires the active involvement of the viewer, but that also somehow overwhelms the senses. It is a spatial experience, in the sense of enveloping the spectator in a discrete and often panoramic zone. Moreover, the temporal experience of digital art – as live, responsive, "real time" – involves a process of *spatialisation* that challenges the tradition of aesthetic *distance*. As Grau points out, "in certain seemingly *living* virtual environments a fragile, central element of art comes under threat: the recipient's act of distancing," which is essential for enabling critical reflection (Grau, "Immersion and Interaction" 304). As Grau also suggests, referring to the transformation of spatial experience brought on by simulation technologies such as telepresence, "inner and visual distance are essential prerequisites for the experience of art and the world in general. Since the eighteenth century, aesthetic theories have regarded distance as a constitutive element of reflection, self-discovery, and the experience of art and nature" (Grau, *Virtual Art* 286). Grau cites the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, for whom *distance* constitutes the subject and is solely responsible for producing the "aesthetic image space." [1] However, he draws few conclusions from this striking observation.

There is certainly a great deal of anxiety among contemporary art critics in relation to the theme of critical distance vis-à-vis aesthetic immersion. Hal Foster, to name one prominent figure in the more mainstream world of international contemporary art, is deeply sceptical:

> Think of the "light and space" art of Robert Irwin and James Turrell: it seems phenomenological, but its phenomenology is somehow faux, already mediated. And this faux-phenomenological art was further technologized in the video projections of artists like Bill Viola – work that wants to overwhelm bodies and space, to produce a kind of techno-sublime. Today this seems to be the desired effect of much art.… And people love it, of course, in large part because it aestheticizes, or rather artifies, an "experience" already familiar to them, the intensities produced by media culture at large. For the most part, such art is happily involved with an image space that goes beyond the distractive to the immersive. (Foster 327)

Foster raises the political danger of spectacular art merely supplementing the spectacle,

producing an effect of disorientation and media intensity rather than critical reflection. But – and this is a key question – is immersion necessarily an uncritical image space? Is there a way of figuring "immersive" experiences that is adequate to the particularity of the works themselves? Is critical immersion possible? To help us answer these questions we might enlist the support of Benjamin and Adorno's writings.

Walter Benjamin's Critique of Contemplative Immersion

Benjamin is very well known for his complex, non-deterministic relation to technological media. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), he offered what has become the twentieth-century's most influential interpretation of both the threats and opportunities posed by the mechanical media of film and photography. Theorists of digital media have seized Benjamin's ideas, such as the notion that the work of art comes to look more and more like the work of art meant for reproduction. Even more important, for my purposes, is Benjamin's ambiguous embrace of the spectator's revitalised critical agency brought about by mechanical media. Benjamin adopts and combines elements of Russian Constructivism, Soviet Cinema and Bertolt Brecht's ideas, inventing his own notion of "distraction" – which is fundamentally social and closely associated with the collective mode of reception enjoyed by cinema and architecture.

Benjamin, of course, argued that the fundamental importance of the Dada artists lay in their break with the "ritualistic" contemplation of the original, unique work of art. As he famously wrote:

> The Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its uselessness for *contemplative immersion*. The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to achieve this uselessness…. What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as reproductions with the very means of production. (Benjamin 237; my emphasis)

Benjamin understood that Dada had been instrumental in challenging art's autonomy and its claims to eternal value. Importantly, he extended this critique to the mode of contemplation. During the nineteenth century, he wrote, "contemplation became a school of thought for asocial behaviour" (Benjamin 238). In short, contemplative immersion is now shorthand for a bourgeois, individualised mode of reception in relation to art. As Andreas Huyssen notes, "Contemplative immersion, which had been quite progressive in an earlier phase of bourgeois emancipation, since the late 19th century had served to sabotage any kind of social praxis geared towards change" (Huyssen 91). Suddenly, in other words, the spectator's viewing relation has been politicised. Benjamin's materialist theory of art, with its emphasis on the collective determination of the meaning of individual work, was meant to replace idealistic aesthetics and is fiercely critical of the contemplative attitude.

To contemporary readers, and particularly those interested in media art, the idea of "contemplative immersion" might sound like something of a paradox. We are more accustomed to the idea that contemplation is somehow opposed to immersion. Unlike the bodily sensations of immersion, when we contemplate we are meant to be rational, collected, in control. But once again, the dictionary reminds us of a different meaning of the term. Contemplation is first associated with "the action of beholding, or looking at with attention and thought" and "the action of thinking about a thing continuously; attentive consideration." But it is also associated with meditation and musing (particularly religious, very commonly in earlier centuries), in which the contemplating subject would often lose control of their senses and their sense of self. It is precisely this paradoxical combination of both a distance and a nearness in "contemplative immersion" that Benjamin elsewhere seeks to evoke and that Adorno also sought to redeem.

Theodor Adorno's Embrace of Contemplative Immersion

In contrast to Benjamin, Adorno held an overtly antagonistic relationship to technology, and a more redemptive role for art. Adorno understood art as a reservoir of critique – ascribing to art a capacity to challenge the instrumental rationality and repressive authority of capitalism. For Adorno, art is neither a reflection of reality nor an aspect of ideology. It is a witness to history – that is, to accumulated experiences and suffering – as well as a place of desire (Popper 51). Adorno's faith in the critical nature and emancipatory effect of art have to be understood within the framework of his analysis of the culture industry (*Kulturindustrie*), which is contained in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), coauthored with Max Horkeimer. To Adorno, serious art's negation of reality seemed both necessary and unavoidable. He summed up his conclusions in a 1963 radio lecture:

> Culture industry is the purposeful integration of its consumers from above. It also forces a reconciliation of high and low art, which have been separated for thousands of years, a reconciliation which damages both. High art is deprived of its seriousness because its effect is programmed; low art is put in chains and deprived of the unruly resistance inherent in it when social control was not yet total. (Adorno, in Huyssen 81)

Art's role, then, lies in part to deprogram its predictable effects.

Adorno, as we know, was strongly critical of Benjamin's optimism in the "Work of Art" essay, and his essay on the cultural industry is written in part as a response to it. But my point here is not to retrace the well known debates between Benjamin and Adorno. [2] I am more interested in considering what their various understandings of immersion might have to offer contemporary media art criticism. Adorno's aesthetic theory, despite its enormous complexity, is at once conventional and potentially radical in terms of the spectator's position. In a key phrase from his posthumous magnum opus, *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

> Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze…. Through *contemplative immersion* the immanent processual quality of the work is set free…. This immanent dynamic is, in a sense, a higher-order element of what artworks are. (Adorno 175–6; my emphasis)

By placing such faith in the "immanent processual quality" of the work, Adorno underlines his key point that art is the realm of individual freedom. His aesthetic theory is traditional, in that he proposes that the significance of an artwork inheres in it, is actually present or abiding in, and the role of the viewer is to actively discover it. Nevertheless, he also insists that art has to be experienced through an embodied sensuality. Within an immanent ontology, the aesthetic becomes an event affecting sensibility itself. We might recall that in his earlier critique of the culture industry, Adorno harshly critiqued cinema on the basis that the spectator is so *absorbed* that there is no space for the *imagination* (which can be read as a direct rebuttal of Benjamin's enthusiastic embrace of cinema's revolutionary potential). The lack of space for the imagination is akin here to the image space that we can think of as prohibiting *critical distance*.

Some Implications for Media Art Criticism

The idea that the meaning of a work derives more from an audience's interpretation of it rather than simply the author's intent is central to much twentieth-century criticism (from Duchamp's claim that the viewer "completes" the work of art to Roland Barthes's "birth of the reader" to Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics"). An inevitable link has been made between this "postmodern" standpoint and that considerable fraction of media art which is concerned with the

explicitinteraction between the work and the audience (e.g. generative graphics that follow interactive inputs or the movements of people within a gallery space). Virtuality and interactivity imply an "activated spectator," apparently bringing Benjamin's ideas about the spectator's new critical agency to a form of realisation. However, as alluded to earlier, within immersive images spaces we also enter *into* the image space; we are integrated into the image, fused with the image medium. How can art criticism – that is, writing about works of art – operate in this environment?

While Benjamin valorised the collective reception of art over an individualistic mode of contemplation, when media art is shown at exhibitions today, the conditions of its reception remain largely contemplative and solitary (darkened spaces, headphones, viewing booths, and so on). Frank Popper, however, anticipates that the future of art lies in group participation. Popper writes: "Because of display technologies and the paradigms on which computers have been based, it has become an all-too-frequent phenomenon to have a single viewer controlling an environment…. The challenge within new media is to overcome this constraint in such a way as to provide an immersive experience for all its users" (Popper 218). Somewhat prescriptively and without full justification, Popper enthuses about "a system that reads audiences movements through a space and then utilizes this data to affect events within the virtual" (Popper 219).

Important works certainly exist in this vein – one thinks of exemplary large-scale projects such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Amodal Suspension, Relational Architecture 8* (2003) (see www.lozano-hemmer.com). This work, performed by members of the public in Yamaguchi, Japan, turned mobile phone text messages into the actions of robotically controlled searchlights. Like a magnified flash-mob, the volume of public participation turned the sky into a "giant communication switchboard." Here, mobile exchanges are transformed from their conventionally private mode and visualised as public information by socially-networked inhabitants of the city. Nevertheless, while net.art and now mobile art experiments are often framed in terms of collaborative authoring – or "distributed aesthetics" – it remains true that the experience of most media art remains fundamentally private (typically limited to a screen in a gallery, or one's own computer monitor).

One important way in which the experience of art becomes more than a private affair is in the form of art criticism, when critics – professional or amateur – publish or discuss their reaction to a work in newspapers, magazines and online. Art criticism is an interpretive portal between art production and broader engagement by others. Yet art criticism today is widely held to be in crisis. [3] In an age defined by pluralism, art criticism has become piecemeal and ad hoc, driven by the market and curatorial fashion; art criticism's authority is weak, its rationale is unclear and its impact diminished. Yet one wonders if conventional notions of art criticism are premised on obsolete aesthetic assumptions. In theory, art criticism assesses the aesthetic excellence of works of art, just as in the popular imagination the critic is first and foremost someone who judges. But a survey of visual art critics at American newspapers in 2002 (Szántó) is particularly interesting in this respect; it ranked judgement well behind education as the perceived task of the critic. Since minimalism, conceptual and performance art in the 1960s, aesthetic judgements about artworks have become more difficult if not obsolete. In the absence of "skill" as an accepted quality of good art, no clear criteria for evaluative judgement have emerged. This is intensified in media art that further devalues the material qualities of individual media and heightens the value of audience participation.

In the face of these observations, few have been able to offer convincing explanations let alone viable solutions. In *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, James Elkins offers a bleak assessment of critics' lack of criteria for judgement, but is completely silent on the rise of media arts. Critical engagement with new media has been fragmented, or ghettoised. I would suggest, however, that the apparent crisis in art criticism is deepened, productively, once we consider the changes of production, transmission and reception that media arts bring. In place of the autonomous art object, art in the digital era increasingly becomes a performative interface for embodied viewer interaction. And the resulting "flexible data set" may be dramatically contrasted to the traditional

static image (Hansen 2004). At the same time, a new form of medium self-consciousness is introduced, as artists working with new media characteristically reflect on and critique the technologies they deploy.

Recently, there have been attempts to come to terms with a new set of aesthetic criteria or qualities that are appropriate for discussing digital art. Andreas Broeckmann, for instance, suggests five aspects of what he calls the machinic aesthetic – image, execution, performance, process, machine (Broeckmann 205). Ron Burnett calls for "a typology of interactive processes" (Burnett 314); he points out that despite Lev Manovich's influential critique of the usefulness of the term, since it has entered the public imaginary it cannot simply be dismissed (334). Given the notorious fuzziness of terms like "new media" and "interactivity," more debate on these issues must ensue. But none of these approaches, useful as they may be, provide the basis for the evaluation of specific works of art. It might in fact be more productive to consider media art in terms of more conventional aesthetic paradigms, as part of a broader history of participatory art.

What Adorno can bring to this discussion is the immanent critical method, namely an approach that engages with the artwork's properties and with the way that artists handle, within specific works, the tension between material and formal arrangement. One thinks of Daniel von Sturmer's video sculpture installations, which generate an intimate relation to the viewer's body, even as they play with scale (see http://www.danielvonsturmer.com). Adorno's preference for an immanent critique, evaluating works in terms of their implications and own modes of existence can be extended to digital immersive art. But the problem with the immanent mode as Adorno formulated it is that it puts viewers, as critics, in the position of *deciphering* a work of art. As suggested, this is no longer the central critical ambition even as it might remain our individual desire as viewers. Registering the body's affects, while dissolving the space of individual self-possession, has become an equally important goal for media art criticism. Ultimately, immersive media art enables us to explore the uncertainty and instability of all perception and consciousness. In this way, such work blurs the normally clear distinctions between self and other, viewer and object. This is not to celebrate merely subjective criticism. Instead, media art forces questions about the situation of art criticism, and the position of the individual art critic. The art itself necessitates a new type of reflective criticism that goes beyond the traditional function of legitimation and judgement, and places the body at the indeterminate centre of critical concerns. In this way, contemplative immersion can shift from an oxymoron to an engaging possibility, and critical immersion can at last begin.

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Endnotes

1. Cassirer's reflections on the power of distance for intellectual productivity and creating awareness owes much to Kant's transcendental idealism. See Ernst Cassirer's 1927 book The

Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy. Trans. M. Domandi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

2. As Huyssen noted back in 1975, "Neither Adorno's thesis of the total manipulatioin of culture… nor Benjamin's absolute belief in the revolutionsing effects of modern reproduction techniques, has withstood the test of time." (Huyssen 93)

3. Many writers have identified a crisis in art criticism (see, for instance, Baker, 2002; Elkins, 2003; Rubenstein, 2006). It is widely agreed that the postmodern critique of formalism has produced a toothless critical culture.

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