Embedding Media in Culture
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If the words "interactive art" and "media art" do not tell you what they are, it would be a good idea to visit the exhibition INTERACTION '01 and experience the works directly. They are all full of originality and playfulness, but besides their immediate charm, they are informed by sophisticated aesthetics. Although some works have the appearance of games, what is at stake is something more interesting and more subtle than that found in the software games on the market. Each work is invested with a particular style and use of the computer, and this is part of their fascination.

However, it may be that after such a visit, however, your perplexity remains intact. Why, you might ask yourself, were these art works created at all? What's the point?" It is for you and your questions that I am here writing this essay. And yet it is these same questions that I am now asking myself.

Some definitions: The word "media" in "media art" refers to digital media. It is an activity that is made possible by using computers and electronic devices. Within this category of media art, interactive art refers to an art that responds actively to the viewer, to his or her movement or sound or to some other parameter of involvement. It is not too much to say that media and interactivity represent the form of art in the age of information technology.

Are you happy with this explanation? I'm not. Once again I say that I am writing this text for those who are not convinced by this explanation, for people who continue to be perplexed by unfamiliar Japanese words like "media ahto(media art)" or "intarakutibu ahto(interactive art)." It has long been the case, throughout the process of Japanese modernization, new ideas are declared from above which the people below are supposed to accept without fully understanding what these ideas are. In our schools, those who accept new ideas and facts quickly without asking questions have typically been admired as smart students. But aren't such students in fact rather stupid? For real intelligence requires the ability to doubt, to ask questions, to enjoy discussing every idea from every angle, to live in uncertainty. It is this concept of intelligence that our country must start to promote and nourish.

Thus, I would like to ask some basic questions about the ideas of this new art. For me, it seems to be very important that both media art and interactive art are called *art*. Many artists use the newest digital technology, but their artistic products are often quite different from commercial products. This difference must come from the fact that they are deemed works of art. But in what sense are they art? This is the starting point of my discussion. In what sense is media art *art*? This is a question that is hardly ever asked by those involved in the creation, education and management of media art. This question inevitably leads to another and more fundamental one: *What is art?* This is a question that many of us are too busy to struggle with. Moreover, such a question cannot be answered if we are guided by the notion of established field or trade.

The question of art's identity is not just an abstract, philosophical issue. On the contrary, it is closely related to ordinary constructs of our daily reality. If a work is presented in an art exhibition instead of an international trade fair, it means that the work is declared to be *art*. That is, we are already committed to a notion of *art* just by showing them or appreciating them in an art exhibition. An institute like

IAMAS(Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences/International Academy of Media Arts and Sciences), where I now work as a professor, is different from normal schools for training digital skill, in that it is concerned with art. (Otherwise, it would be a waste of money to have artists and philosophers working there.)

Media art contains in itself a requirement that it should be art. What, again, is *art*? Asking the question of art in this way seems to be more useful than asking: "Is media art 'art'?" For, while the latter sounds as if concerned with the conventional notion of art, the question of *what art is*, provoked by thinking through the status of media art, can lead to a new understanding of art in our contemporary world.

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Media art cannot be art in the same way as modern art has been. To illustrate this, we can compare the experience of media art with that of some popular modern works of art. Just suppose someone is looking at a painting by Vincent Van Gogh. The viewer may know little more about Gogh's paintings than about media art-works. But s/he is aware, more or less, of the basic narrative which describes how hard the painter tried to transcend his personal self through art, so hard that he lingered on the verge of insanity. However commonplace this narrative may sound, it gives the viewer a certain framework, in which s/he combines the meaning of the painting to her/his own life. The narrative is concerned with existential questions like "How can we cope with the solitude of life?" "How can we live for others?" "What is the meaning of life?" and so on. Thus, the viewer is encouraged not only to appreciate the work from a purely aesthetic point of view, but also to interpret it with the deepest concerns of life, because we all share the basic facts of life that we live in solitude, find it hard to love others, and are still in search of the meaning of life.

In most media artworks, there seems to be no narrative that points us to those deep questions. Media art does not reach the depth of our existential being in the same direct way as modern art does. So, it is hard to think of media art as art in the sense of modern art.

Then, is it possible to regard media art as an offspring of avant-garde art? In, say, the ready-made works by Marcel Duchamp or in the works by Andy Warhol, there seems to be no existential narrative connecting our being directly with these works of art. The works themselves don't seem to show any deep content which we can identify as an artist's expression of his thoughts or feelings. This absence is one reason why the scandals they provoked when first viewed touched profoundly at the our cultural order and meaning: "How can such a thing be deemed art?"

But of course, when the avant-garde initiated a revolt against traditional art, it was largely aware of the consequences of such transgressions. By seeming to be, from the standpoint of traditional art, sheer nonsense, it forced the viewer to reflect on the context surrounding the art work, i.e., the museum as an cultural institution, the discourse of art criticism, and indeed the very notion of *art* as an understandable cultural norm. By provoking these reflections, the avant-garde art can be character-ized to a certain extent as "interactive". Here the content of the work is nothing but a series of questions proposed by the work to the viewer about the social and cultur-al context to which the work belongs. The extent and depth of these questions is a measure of the quality of a particular avant-garde work.

Media art is much less rebellious. It seldom reflects on, let alone resists, the cul-tural framework of art the way avant-garde art does. Reflective questions do not constitute the core meaning of a media art. Here, "interaction" is not so much a process happening in our consciousness or interpretation, as a real-time response given by the machine/artwork according to physical movements of the viewer. (Paul

Virilio criticized this concept of interaction as an alienation of the ability for action.¹) Whatever it is, the meaning of art in media art is not coextensive with the meaning of art for the avant-garde.

What we can learn from the above analysis is this: In order to think media art as art, we should not depend upon conventional notions of *art*, whether in the sense of modern art or avant-garde art. Instead, we have to develop a new notion of art. And this is a requirement not just for media art, but for every contemporary activity involved in art. The virtue of media art is that it is a new development in art that is uniquely engaged with questions of technology.

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A century ago, it was political radicalism that gave people a vision of a utopian (or an apocalyptic) future. Today, technology seems to have taken over this role. Almost every morning, we learn of some new development in information technology and biotechnology, its very rapidity filling us with constant amazement along with hopes and fears. Innovations, introduced into industrial production with increasing efficiency and with more speed and complexity than ever before. Such change is drastic and seemingly irresistible. No doubt technology offers us great benefit, but at the cost of a dissolution of individual body and mind into huge impersonal systems. If art is concerned with human freedom in its deepest sense, media art has the ability to raise the possibility of freedom in the world dominated by technology, a freedom *within* technology, a freedom demonstrated by using technology in unusual and personal ways. By "deconstructing" the hold of technology, art opens up new visions of freedom in technologically oriented cultures and societies.

But at the same time, there is a danger for media art which links itself too closely to technology. Such closeness breeds in media art a fascination with technology itself, confuses its own radical potential as art with its direct impact as a technology. If we think a work as radically new because it makes use of the newest technology, we are undermining the very thing that makes media art valuable. Looking back over the history, we come across similar misjudgments about art.

In the Soviet Union in 1930s, there was artistic trend, normalized by the government, called socialist realism, in which the meaning and value of art was determined from the viewpoint of how well it serve to promote the education and establishment of Socialism. Now, if the so-called "IT(Information Technology) Revolution" aims at the total reorganization of society, culture and everyday life of Japan, it looks like a kind of de-politicized socialist revolution, in which media art, just like socialist realism in olden time, is supposed to represent the images of a utopian future realized by information technology. In other words, the meaning of media art is to propagandize media technology and to contribute to the spread of "information literacy." Media art would then be an approved art, a kind of functionary of industry and the state in their goal of total integration and control of social life.

Thus, in the end, we are again led to the question: "What is the meaning of *art* in media art?" In those periods when a certain civil practices and ideologies exerted great power over society, art opened up a space of freedom by subverting the dominant ideology. It was different. But since the dominant forces of today — technology and industry in the context of de-politicized world capitalism — are not ideological in a straightforward sense, art cannot simply oppose them. (If it did, it would look like anti-progressive romanticism.) To find out what media art can do in this situation, we need to take a more general look at the situation of art in our contemporary society.

Media art tries to discover alternative ways to use information technology, to find a purpose different from that in normal practices of information culture. Media art is the name of various attempts and projects to make technology deviate from its usefulness in everyday reality. As seen in the artistic practices of Dada and Surrealism, or in the concept of "alienation" of Bertolt Brecht and Russian Formalism, the act of "derailing" something out of its everyday track, making something look unfamiliar or showing another side of reality, is one of the central functions of the contemporary art. Media art "alienates" technology. In this sense, and in this sense only, can it be called a merger (or a vision of the merger) of science and art.

It is true that from the viewpoint of long history of civilization, science and art were not separated activities, for both derived from the desire of humankind to deal with the secrets of nature and the universe. In this sense, the integration of science, technology and art is a singular ideal that has been pursued throughout the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution and the twentieth century. But if media art is thought of the achievement of the ideal simply because it applies science and technology to an art work, without paying any attention to the history of modern art and avant-garde art, this judgment is too narrow and optimistic. It fails to take into account the inevitable change that took place in art in the twentieth century.

Throughout the last century, art went through a great mutation. With the decline of the avant-garde movement, art has lost its vocation as the pioneering force of culture, as the means through which a new totalizing view of life and world could be offered and explored. Instead, art was reduced to being simply one of many cultural sectors. This is what some philosophers like to call "the end of art". In order to grasp the true meaning of this concept, however, we should at least careful enough to make distinctions between two different meanings of art, a distinction which seem to be often confused in many postmodern "the end of art" argument.

One meaning is art as an institution. This notion of art was born in the West, and it is inseparable from an individualistic, human-centered understanding of the universe. This understanding parallels the practices and value judgments in the modern Western civil society, and supported by its cultural system including the art academy, museums, concert halls, etc. Moreover, this institutional model of art has functioned as a kind of mirror that attempts to reflect and represent every form of art in (non-western, pre-modern or post-modern) cultures. Though art in this sense is inherently Western, it assumes an objectivity and universality, applicable to every culture and every age.

This notion of art ignores the deep asymmetry of art in the West and that in the non-western cultures. For example, we cannot understand *art* in Europe and *art* in Japan as the same thing. Japanese language has an established translation of the word "art", but this word does not have the same semantic range as its original. In Japan, "geijutsu(art)" or "geijutsu-ka(arttist)" are often too high-sounding words, and people today prefer to avoid them by using words like "ahto(art)" or "ahtisu-to(artist)." This complication is one of the traces left in the language of an older and different perspective, showing too how the Western notions have influenced but not quite penetrated the Japanese way of thinking in the course of modernization[ii].

On the other hand, we can use the word *art* in an extended, casual way, and this constitutes the other definition of the word. Art in this sense is the name for various attempts to express our understanding of life, the world and its possibilities. Art is an experiment, an attempt to say something new, an effort to go beyond the commonly accepted boundary of our daily reality, to think and to live in a different way. In this sense, I think we can use the word "art" without worrying too much about the fact this word was originally coined in the West.

What "ended" in the notion of "the end of art" is the former sense of art, i.e. art as an institution. This "end" is welcome because it means that our eyes are now open to various different forms of culture around the globe. But this end has its negative aspect too, which is the loss of the standard. Since Western modern art has ceased to function as the standard, no one is able to say with confidence what art is and should be. And although *art as an institution* has come to an end, *institutions of art* remain with us, just as the shell remains after the snail dies. These institutions belong to the total social system produced by the modern West. In 1990s, we have seen a boom in the construction of gorgeous buildings intended to contain art. Museums have become more and more perfected as containers of art, but there is no standard as to what to put into them. Predictably, the loss of a standard in recent years has led art museums to open their spaces to a diverse activities which had long been excluded from the category of art. Thus, indigenous cultures, political messages, ecological views, various forms of social criticism, claims of regional, ethnic, sexual, cultural groups coexist with variations of the avant-garde and pop art. These works, whatever they are, have become squatters, occupying buildings that have ceased to know who their proper occupant should be. And it is important to know that media art is sometimes one of these squatters.

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The current situation of art in the West(including Japan) is more or less under the influence of pluralism, multiculturalism, relativism and an "anything goes" type of anarchism. It is pluralism which, as Marina Grzenic has correctly pointed out, a globalized capitalism would welcome. Likewise, the problem with our contemporary museums is not that of a universal standard dominating art, but rather one of a pluralist symbiosis of heterogeneous elements which neutralizes any truly critical moments. It is not about the opposition between globalization and nationalism, but the "abstract collaboration" among multifarious activities, without having productive interactions to each other[iii].

Where do we look for this potential of *art*, this moment of freedom, in these stifling and uncertain modern times? Among other things, how can we conceive the future of media art? I think one clue can be found in looking more critically at the encounter of the digital media and various other elements of culture.

For example, when we try to represent traditional or different cultures using digital technology, we are faced with an extremely critical question that involves the kind of relationship that we have with these cultures. If we regard a traditional culture as an objective thing and aim to preserve it by way of a digitized database or archive, there is nothing new to say. Recording, preserving and classifying artworks as something already completed has long been the conventional routine of modern museums. Of course digitization has a practical value, enabling quick reference and search. Thanks to it, we can analyze data from every possible angle, and that saves a great deal of time and space. But this utility does no not make an essential difference in terms of pluralism and control; in fact, the project of perfecting the digitalization of culture will in the end reinforce the institutional power of the museum.

Nevertheless, digitization has its subversive side which has something to do with its temporal and changeable character. Unlike traditional art, which bases its authority on a sense of weight and permanence, media art is not, by its very nature, a fixed object even if at times (in the form of installation work, CD-ROM and so on) it looks like a complete and closed object. Indeed, It would be more productive to think of media artworks as *suggestions* for a new thinking, as constantly revising *projects*, and as *proposals* for new environments. Hence, digitization, because of its temporal character, points to deconstruction of the authority of art, thereby opening

up new ways to interpreting and criticizing the "cultural treasures" or "historical records".

One of the works included in INTERACTION '01 is "Kidai-shoran," the digitized *Emakimono*(scroll painting) packaged in CD-ROM. This 'preservation project' is not just a record of a piece of traditional art. Rather, it seeks to immerse the viewer into the event of the art object, in this case bringing the viewer to the street depicted in the painting, immersed them in it, as if s/he were actually walking along a street in the city of Edo(the former name for Tokyo) during the eighteenth Century. It also suggest that some interesting connections between the time structure in emakimono and that in cyberspace. Another piece, "The Kyogen," is a DVD introduction to the world of Kyogen, a traditional farce which used to accompany the Noh. Unlike the conventionally fixed dichotomy 'pure tradition spectacle / modern audience" that underlies the usual appreciation of traditional theater, "Kyogen" allows multiple and self-conscious viewpoints. This is signaled, for example, when Mr. Mansai, a popular young Kyogen actor, speaks to the audience in a Western suit and tie. In this interpenetration of tradition and new, we are made aware of the particularity of cultural context on both sides of the event.

"The Time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau" by Jean-Louis Boissier is a splendid work, in which we understand another relation of cyberspace to philosophical and reflective texts. Although it has become something of a cliché to say that electric media is replacing printed media, destroying "the Gutenberg Galaxy", few who repeat this wisdom grasp what it means. The strength of Bossier's work is that it responds to this idea by envisioning a new relation between reading and the computer. This envisioning is achieved by of way illustrating our experience of reflective thinking in digital media.

The intermingling of histories in "Beyond Manzanr," a VRML work by Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, is astonishing and captivating. The work deals the concentration camps that were constructed by the American Government for Japanese Americans during WWII. However, it goes beyond being a mere record of this unfortunate historical scene, by combining the landscape of Manzanr with that in Iran, a Japanese garden with an Islamic one, and by extension the fate of Japanese immigrants with that of Iranian immigrants, and by extension all internal "enemies" of the American government. Traditionally, it has been an important function of poetry to bring together images which are unconnected in everyday thought. "Beyond Manzanar" evokes an associative experience similar to that in poetry, but utilizing virtual reality instead of words. Given the tragic consequences that religious and cultural differences are associated with in our contemporary world, it is encouraging to imagine media art as a tool that would help us rethink differences with more connectedness and with greater depth.

The usual image of media art in Japan is one in which it is linked largely to political inhibitions and exhortations, industrial techniques and business growth. Contrast this with the images of media that are projected by some of the artists at INTERACTION '01. Here it is a matter of the potential of digital media to open up two way dynamic flows between different fields in contemporary and traditional cultures, and of creating new spaces for discussion and reflection about culture. This, finally, is the meaning of interactive art that we sought at the beginning of this essay, its identity as a media art, its potential as alternative form of media. It is a potential that is certainly great and desirable, but a potential that is also elusive and easily lost. And this is precisely why exhibitions like INTERACTIONS '01 have come to be so necessary.

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i) Paul Virillio, *Le Bombe informatique*, Galilee, 1998.

ii) I once tried to analyze this situation by means of the notion "self-colonization," in another context of modern Japanese culture.
Hiroshi Yoshioka, "Samurai and Self-colonization in Japan", in *Decolonization of Imagination*, ed. Jan N. Pieterse, Zed Publishers 1994.

iii) Marina Gržinić, "Does Contemporary Art need Museums Anymore?", *in Future Perspectives*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Marino Cettina Gallery(Umag, Croatia), 2001.