

Queering New Media Art: Looking back, looking forward

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ABSTRACT

On February, 23 2018, during the National College of Art Association Conference in Los Angeles, Richard Rhinehart, Liss LaFleur and I co-chaired a panel titled “Queering New Media Art and Asking Questions about Nothing”. This panel was presented within the New Media Caucus’ Media Lounge day of events. Based on my presentation that day, this essay will use my personal experiences with the New Media Caucus and academia in the last twenty years to explore the relationships amongst art, new media, and queerness, expose some problems with these terms, and potentially provide one of many ways out of perpetuating their continuous entanglement.

INTRODUCTION

I joined the New Media Caucus (NMC) in 2007, after a brief stint in the Queer Caucus for the Arts at the College of Art Association (CAA), and the Multicultural Caucus at the Society for Photographic Education (SPE). As an artist and educator, who employs new(er) technologies in their creative process, who also identifies as queer and brown, I have always sought to foster inclusive opportunities, in order to welcome other practitioners, like me, who may have felt excluded in our hegemonic art world. Prior to the CAA 2018 panel “Queering New Media Art and Asking Questions about Nothing” I proposed variations on the theme in several academic circles, venues, conferences, and the like. I also hoped that by inserting my own self in decision-making positions I would contribute to ending the struggle, or at least cause some pause for reflection through my presence. It was not until the end of my term on the board of the NMC, and upon my collaboration with Richard Rhinehart and Liss LaFleur, that queerness in new media finally seemed to have gained some overt or open acceptance, or at least traction, in terms of its programming, or at least another opportunity to have this discussion. My ultimate conclusion, however, may be that these perspectives (of being, of creating, of leading, et cetera), may be inherently irreconcilable, and that perhaps an alternative route, albeit an old one, may best accommodate intersectional perspectives.

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

During the presentation at CAA 2018, its subsequent discussion, and upon much reflection since then, I find that the goal of questioning IF new media art can be queered has become more worthwhile than arriving at some definite conclusion, even as a perpetual quest. As a multi-cultural being, I often negotiate multiple means of communication and expression, and often think that meaning is as malleable and animated as paint on a surface, and/or pixels on a screen. While originally I considered that the best way to queer new media art might have been through subject matter (art that addresses queer themes, while using new media), their makers (queer artist utilizing new media art “things”), or discourse (accommodating oneself under the broad history of queer theory, and their histories), I now find these approaches limiting. Under these notions, new media art has already been queered (if anything, the three panelists and the participating audience attested to that much, and the many who have come before us). Perhaps time was needed for us queer folks to populate the new media art circle. My concern, however, is that this type of absorption could consist of a (new) form of erasure: one through assimilation.

Queer and Art

To further elaborate how one may queer *Art*, I grapple with the thoughts of subject and object, maker and made, content and form, object and subject, and the object, as well as their relationship to one another, quite often.. For example, in the sentence “I create a sculpture” the “I” is the subject and “sculpture” is the object (Fig. 1). Of course, sculpture itself is an object-based art form. If I change the sentence to “Sculpture changes a room,” “sculpture” then becomes the subject and “room” the object. It is easy to get lost in these word games, and the idea that shifting contexts affect our perception.

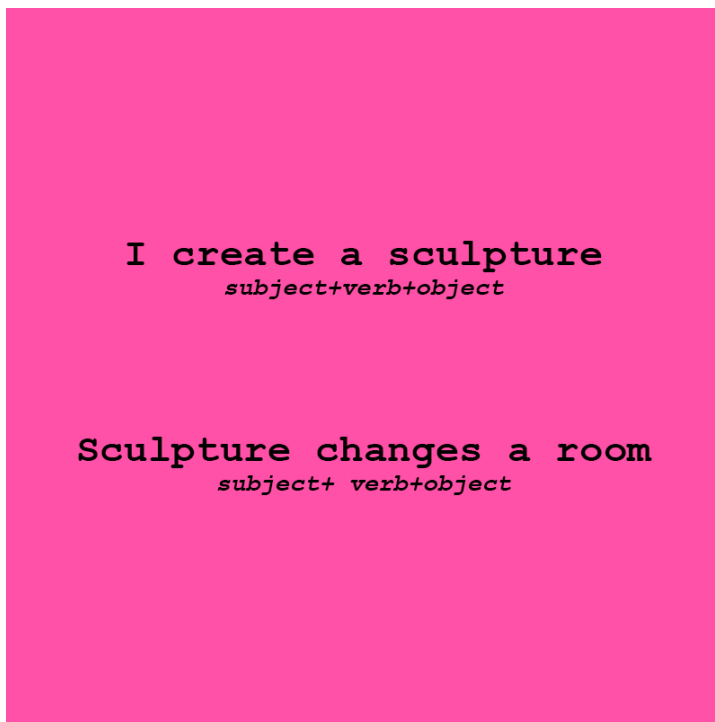


Figure 1. Object/subject shifting relationship, created by the author.

This instability and contingency of meaning or classification allows for a queering in art. Regardless of how it comes about, the fact is that inclusion is still imperative, because one thing that seems to go unchanged is the hetero-normative, homogeneous, and hegemonic state of Art institutions, contexts, their population and so forth. Still in our times, if the space or institution does not allow for any variation from its problematic norm, a recontextualization via “erasure” of the works of art and/or artists often takes place (case in point Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns seldom-spoken relationship and/or their sexual orientation, an invisibility that is somewhat compensated by their male white privilege).

Having said that, an alternative to the queering of aesthetics through the Benneton-like peppering (or tokenization) of art spaces with queerness is not a goal, although I do not mean to propose we should stop those either, because they may allow for the beginning of a dialogue. The new media art world has discussed this in many ways already, with Micha Cardenas and Jacob Gaboury, to name a few, in recent years. What I favor is a notion of engendering and implementing a queer disposition or strategy in addition to numerical inclusion as a means to reach equity. If we keep on considering institutional spaces, it is useful to pay attention to the space between this contingency and polarity: the center. This center, this inter, is ever present and often fights penetration, because the threat of instability always hovers the status quo. From personal and professional experience, I have rarely found an open door inviting me to walk in. Sometimes the door is ajar and I peak, sometimes I “draw” the door on my own (if borrowing one of Wile E. Coyote’s often-used but ultimately fail-prone strategies), and sometimes I kick through the wall. Queering sometimes entails making the opening, walking through, and acting out. But I do not want us to confuse “center” with “middle,” because that seems to be the place a lot of queer artists, and women, and people of color, remain in academic career – one can look at the dismaying ratios of full professors and deans, et cetera of non-diversity, in relation to the larger presence in associate levels and chair/directorship and other middle management positions.

The center is a contentious point that looks around and points out, and bursts the edges around itself. I often think of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ take-away prints placed on the floor, in the center of a museum gallery, and how the action of removing one and re-placing them in one’s domestic space decentralizes the art context. Similarly, his billboard work, displaying an intimate scene of an empty bed, presented in a public space, allowed us to look into a private and complex instance in a temporary urban setting. When we do not disrupt the institutional shells and enter their center, we perpetuate silence and invisibility. This lack of access and representation attests to the “nothing” portion of the title of our panel, which I equate to erasure and amnesia. To become visible, to make your mark, to remember and be remembered is a queering act, to let your voice be heard, and most importantly, to create a space where others can be invited into the same space as you, queers the centers. Queering thus constitutes a transgressive act, however subtle.

Media

I want to revisit *Art* again, and eventually get to the word *New*, but before I get there, I want us to take a look at the word *Media*. What is *Media*? Is it the plural of medium, of mass-communication vehicles? Or both? *Media* is yet another term of contingency.

In many ways “old media,” what we used to know as television (among others), has been getting queerer and queerer these days, with *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the 2018 Winter Olympics. And

yet the invisibility and erasure continues. When the *Pulse* nightclub massacre in Orlando took place in 2016, there seemed to exist a systemic erasure of the color of the people killed and their sexual orientation, even though the context was obviously gay. Once the religion/ethnicity of the shooter became known, the questioning of his sexuality also came into play, which aided both the terrorist narrative and the traditional punitive death a queer person must endure at the end (both of his and most of his victims, see/read *The Celluloid Closet* for further reference).[1] Talk about intersectional media vilification.

And to be clear, in queering center and spaces, I hope we do it to build positivity, inclusion, and equity, even if it is through disruption and protest. Inclusion does not mean, however, happy rainbows and kumbaya. Conflict can promote growth.

Another example of invisibility or erasure has recently taken place, in my view, through the little-to-no mention, in written media on the Internet, about Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Obama, an artist who in addition to openly being a black man, is also openly gay. Again, the main narrative that includes his sexuality was the briefly lived sperm-gate scandal that Sean Hannity tried to instigate, rather unsuccessfully. Otherwise, Wiley was mostly de-queered in mass media.

One recent constructive presence in (old) media has been Adam Rippon, the beautiful ice skater that has conquered the hearts of many, as being the first openly gay skater prior to attending an Olympic event. Although it is shocking that this would be big news in 2018, for a variety of reasons, Rippon has been incredibly articulate and charming, presenting a celebratory and intelligent queerness that is quite endearing and inspiring, even for this middle-aged queen. Since the 2018 Olympics, he has become an active and popular celebrity in queer activism online.



Figure 2. Adam Rippon's tweet from February 18, 2018 (shown without permission).

Please keep this tweet from Rippon in mind, when I conclude this essay. Rippon made a decision based on group benefit, and removed himself from the front and placed himself in the center, where the action without glory happens.

New and Art

Let us look at the words *New* and *Art*, as they seem to go hand in hand. Art seems to have always preoccupied itself with the new, the avant-garde, the looking forward. This is, of course, the self-perpetuating modernist project we never seem to be able to break away from. The usual art historical narrative that has been broken down a million times, and it still needs further breaking, accumulates one person (usually male, usually white, usually straight or de-queered), after another similar person. Art is seen in a continuum of time, rather than many concentric circles with porous timelines, with many players and movements, and even more people and expressions left out. Art, as a context, promotes heteronormativity and homogeny. In Art, the eraser seems to be applied more often than the brush.

New Media, without *Art*, vacillates on being both inclusive and exclusive, which makes sense since the technologies we often use frequently serve “profit” rather than “knowledge” or “expression.” *New Media*, as a form, is contingent; new media is the forever young, focused on the present and looking forward. New Media is always replacing itself. This looking forward, in terms of its form/shape/materiality, while grounded in the present, is an important distinction for future use. The *New* is always on the verge of becoming old, replaced by a newer “new,” much like the canonical Art Historical narrative. Of course it is very clear that *New Media Art*, in specific, at times uses the past as its subject. But as its visibility and its rewards, it often only looks forward (or the more forward-looking it may be, the “purer” or higher new media art may get).

New Media Art

New Media Art is a contentious term even for us practitioners and educators, with many of us often discussing the appropriateness, the need, or the use, or the traction of the term – with few inconclusive results, but many interesting exchanges. If we use the queering notion from the beginning of this essay, *New Media Art* benefits from the shifting possibility of including both itself as form or subject, though I would pose that the latter has less acceptance in techno-centric circles (this opinion coming from my own observation).

To me, what Queering, New, Media, and Art have in common is the possibility for opening up a contingent space that may include anything that could happen *in* between, in its “centers.” Here are some terms used throughout this text, as a means of looking back and forward:

- Inviting
- Invisibility
- Intersectional
- Inclusion
- Internet

In, Inter, In the center, in the circle: Intermedia.

Intermedia

In preparation for the conference presentation I consulted four texts, which referred to many other texts. Of course, talking about *Intermedia* cannot leave out Dick Higgin’s well-know and oft-amended article, and here I (re)present his concentric circles:

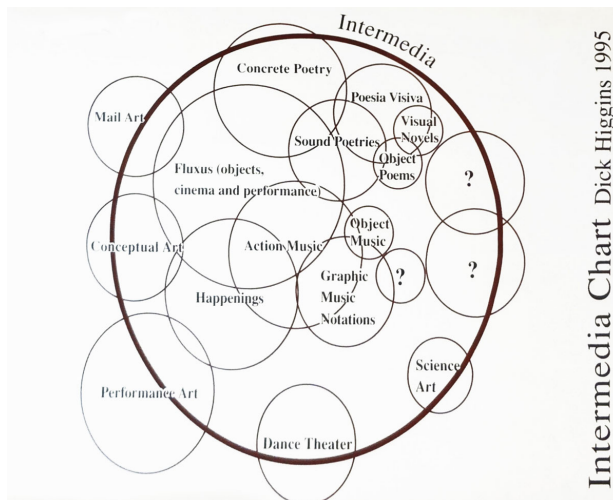


Figure 3. *Dick Higgins, Intermedia Chart illustration, 1995 (used without permission).*

“Intermediality has always been a possibility since the most ancient times, and though some well-meaning commissar might try to legislate it away as formalistic and therefore antipopular, it remains a possibility wherever the desire to fuse two or more existing media exists.” [2]

New Media Art’s artists could really improve this representation by animating this chart, allowing for compression, expansion, movement, porousness, chance, and confluence.

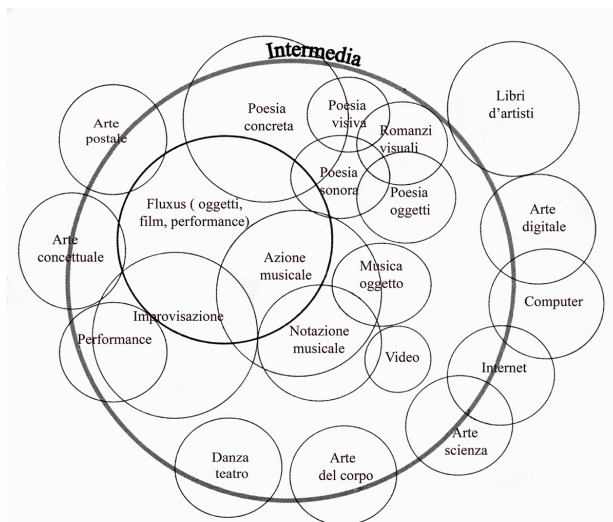


Figure 4. *Demosthenes Agrafiotis, Poesia Visiva: Una Piccola Guida, 2003, (used without permission).*

This alternative variation, here translated from the Greek to Italian, has incorporated some more recent practices, but again, its lack of dynamism only supports the self-perpetuating homogeneous modern silo-ing of medias, practices, peoples, periods, expressions and so forth, which always comes with exclusions.

Anna Brzyzki's article "New Media, Old Media, Inter-media, Trans-media: A Historical Perspective" was published on *Media-N* ten years ago, an anniversary I find extremely exciting. I often use it in my teaching.

(...) art vocabulary does not emerge in a linguistic vacuum nor are its foundational assumptions endemic to the art world. For instance, in the case of the *new*, *inter-*, *trans-media*, there is an intriguing parallel between the art terms and two other, seemingly unrelated sets of terms: *national*, *international*, and *transnational* on the one hand, and *disciplinary*, *interdisciplinary*, and *transdisciplinary* on the other. In all three cases the development of the terminology followed the same chronological trajectory. (...). It is likely given the underlying logic of the shared prefixes, *inter-* and especially *trans-*, that in all those cases the shift in the vocabulary away from the root (medium, nation, discipline) may be more than a simply reflection of the emergence of new forms of social or cultural practice. I would like to suggest that it is an expression of a widely shared (if not necessarily articulated) desire to finally move beyond the basic conceptual categories of the modern episteme. [3]

Intermedia seems to have a self-perpetuating currency because it allows for expansion, because it operates within between-spaces through centering and decentering. This term is dear to me, because I graduated with an MFA of Art in Electronic Intermedia from the University of Florida, and really fought (and lost) for the naming of a new program I co-founded at my previous academic position, back in 2006, which was eventually framed as "New Media," *sans* Art, in a B.A. context. In my current job I insisted on calling my area as Intermedia Art, and this new approach is flowering here, perhaps due to our student population demographics.

Recently, Anna and I had an interesting conversation about her article, given our current political times, and the (re) rise of Fascism following the encroaching Neo-nationalism of the last decade. It would be great to consider how her article would accommodate the ten-year gap, if it were to be expanded.

As a student and early practitioner/educator of *Intermedia*, this label of in-betweeners, that thrives in contingency and elasticity, welcomed me, or provided a safe space, within the exclusionary academic world where art and technology intersected. This is why I was so happy to encounter the term in José Esteban Muñoz's writing, and his co-relating of queering and intermediation.

"Queer Utopian practice is about 'doing' and 'building' in response to the status of nothingness assigned to us by the heteronormative world."

"Intermedia is the world before and after we chop it up into bits of pieces and stash it away in a filing cabinet labeled MINE, YOURS, THEIRS." [4]

Muñoz's notion that *Intermediation* provided the ability to both look back and look forward, while operating in the vast space in between, engendering potentiality within hybrid forms of expression, resonates to me. Intermedia, as an environment, propelled me to come out both personally and artistically in the late 90s, because that space of contingency allowed for my expression of difference, of otherness, to exist. This is something I plan to continue doing with

my professional life. But I have always known that I cannot do this alone, and that I have to share my successes and privilege with others. I have been trying to queer academic environments for decades, it seems. The two times I ran for the Board of the SPE, in the early 2000s, I clearly stated in my candidacy agenda their need for promote inclusion through the creation of both a queer caucus and a new media caucus in their midst. Both times I was not elected, but fortunately the seeds were somewhat planted in that group – a few years ago their queer caucus was officially chartered. Oftentimes we share an idea, and someone else gets the credit for it. Most women and people of color will relate to this. I have practiced the making of peace with these happenstances and focused on the greater good over personal reward. This is yet another aspect of centering and decentering, of engendering collaborative long-term initiatives, however self-effacing it may be.

Another queering through cross-pollenating I tried, a few times, was to repeatedly propose panels of themes very similar to this one to both NMC and CAA's Queer Caucus for the Arts that converged these terms and these two groups of people, and most of them were not accepted, with the exception of the *Cybersex: What's Art Got to Do with It?* panel I chaired in 2010, which was tangentially queer, and this one in 2018.

Similarly, during my time as NMC's president I proposed and encouraged many initiatives that broadened the reach of our group, away from the coasts, and of course, without the hard work and the many better ideas brought up by the board and the committees, many of them have been actualized; we have fostered centering through decentralization, we have communicated better with one another, we have included more decision-makers in our processes, and we have looked back and forward while working hard at the present time.

This brings me to the final influential text I have read for this presentation, which was brought to me by Rich Rinehart, once again, while we continuously talked about this panel throughout last year: "The subtle ways colleges discriminate against poor students, explained with a cartoon", by Alvin Chang. [5]

This long text really made me realize how my intersectional being affected my approach to leadership, and as such also provided a space for queering. Traditionally underrepresented students often work best from an interdependent learning methodology, which goes against the independent learning/thinking/achieving that is the hallmark of western independent/individual education (work hard and YOU can succeed, independence being the goal), and the tradition in Western Art. In interdependency, collective well-being and progress becomes the goal. My current institution is designated as Hispanic-serving, and the vast majority of our students are non-traditional, so Chang's article provided me with very real notions that play out in front of me, on a daily basis. In many ways this interdependent mode also relates to some queer strategies in the arts from the past, with collectives such as General Idea, and more currently with social practices that intersect with technology, Future Farmers being a good example of that. Adam Rippon, probably unknowingly, did just that when he gave up a starring position as a correspondent to staying with his team.

Pedagogically speaking, for years now, like many educators in my generation, I have facilitated my courses through the creation of a learning circle, where we all metaphorically deposit our lived experiences in its center, where hierarchies collapse, and we all spread the take-aways beyond the boundaries of course, rank, diploma, and campus. We learn through the thinking and

acting that we are all responsible for each other's success. We transfer our learned knowledge into our present experiences, tracing many lines between past, present, and future. While the perpetuation of erasure may still exist through this methodology, it is a risk I find worth taking.

Ubuntu

I am because we are: we are because I am.

This African philosophy has been my subconscious *mantra* for leadership, both in the academic departments I have led, in leadership positions in professional organizations (with varied and contingent degrees of success), and in the communities I reside. My leadership style might have been received with skepticism, as in “what is his hidden agenda?” and at times with disdain, as if I am not equipped to lead because I am okay with putting other people in charge of specific tasks, and not always being at the head of the table, or the center of attention. By providing delegation, I believe I empower the ones around me. I do not want to or need to be “the man.” We all have something to contribute; individual achievements translates into collective success, and vice-versa. I hope that as an organization, the New Media Caucus continues to welcome varying models, abilities, and presentations in its board, and the activities it sponsors.

For me, to lead is to serve. It is to place the needs of others ahead of one's own. It is to create and advance spaces for the greater good. Leadership and service, together, are quite revolutionary, even if this sentiment is not always expressed loudly. We, as queer folks, artists, educators, and leaders can form the ultimate circle of inclusion, a circle that expands and accommodates qualities and conflicts, a circle that looks in and out, back and forward, and finds other between-spaces and centers that need activation, compassion, stimulation, that welcome people who may need a door opened or broken down for them. My goal has always been to represent and show difference through my presence, so that people may begin to think that it is okay to work with someone who is different. My interdependent, intermedia approach is my form of queering new media art and the academy. It is my disposition, it is my strategy, but it is ultimately not my property. So each one of us have a role here, if we insert the collective needs and aspirations into our midst.

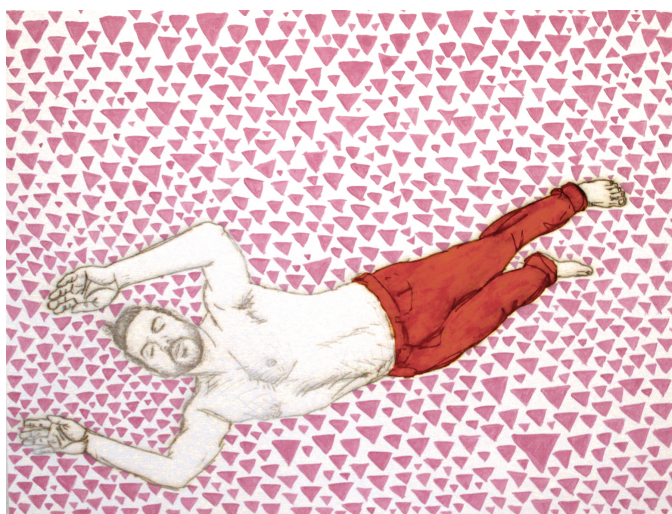


Figure 5. Vagner Mendonça Whitehead, Pink and Orange, 2017, laser-etching and acrylic paint on panel, with permission by the author/artist.

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I would like to first thank my co-panelists Richard and Liss: thank you so much for your talent, patience, and collegiality. I also want to thank the New Media Caucus's E+E Committee, for selecting and including our panel, CAA's Service to the Artists Committee, for sponsoring the Media Lounge at the national conference in Los Angeles. Last but not least, I want to thank all the attendants at the panel: you truly inspire me and give me hope for the future.

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AUTHOR BIO

Vagner Mendonça Whitehead's practice encompasses traditional and newer media art-making, curatorial projects, and creative writing, as well as teaching and engaging with community. His artworks display accidental and forced intersections of personal experiences, histories, geo-locations, languages, and found artifacts, presented in group and solo exhibitions in art galleries, museums, film and video festivals, nationally and internationally. As Professor of Intermedia Art and Chair of the Department of Visual Arts at Texas Woman's University, Vagner aims to empower traditionally under-represented art students, scholars, and citizens, in higher education and beyond.

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