

HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AESTHETICS, ARCHIVE: THEORETICAL PATHS

INTRODUCTION

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What is media art? Providing a working definition of its object is critical to any emerging new field of study, but particularly to the field of media art. The product of practices that often involve rapidly changing technologies and ephemeral performance elements, media art is difficult for critics, curators, and archivists to pin down in terms of the established taxonomies of art history or film and media studies. Laying the groundwork for the following parts of the book, this part offers four different approaches to the methodological, theoretical, and practical challenges involved in developing a taxonomy of media art that is both historically sound and practically useful.

As Chris Wahl shows in his contribution, the term “media art” first appeared about two decades ago and is closely related to the emergence of the Internet. Since then “media art” has been widely used as an umbrella term that covers video art, installation art, and other artistic practices involving film, digital (moving) images, and recorded sound. Offering a brief genealogy, Wahl traces the history of video, installations, and performance art since the 1960s, with a focus on Nam June Paik and the Fluxus movement. He highlights the importance of television and video technology and their impact in the 1960s and 1970s. Wahl maps the field of media art through three main types of artistic practice: “performance and interaction,” “installations and projections,” and “*dispositif* and deconstruction.” He also outlines three sets of thematic constants: “body and voice, language and writing,” “ego identity and sexuality,” and “surveillance/control.”

Acknowledging the methodological challenges posed by the hybrid time-based practices of media art, Wanda Strauven highlights the virtues of media archaeology, an approach that reframes film history and art history to comprehensively account for the intertwined histories of media art, new media, and film. In a series of close readings Strauven shows how media archaeology, as proposed by Siegfried Zielinski, Erkki Huhtamo, Wolfgang Ernst, and Thomas Elsaesser, variously draws on Foucault's conceptual framework of a history of the present to locate current and historical media practices in a network of technologies and discourses. Abandoning film theory's classical question "What is film?" for an inquiry into the "where" and "when" of media practices, media archaeology comes in four varieties focusing, respectively, on the old in the new, the new in the old, recurring topoi, and ruptures and discontinuities. Highlighting the value of the first three approaches, Strauven endorses the fourth as particularly apposite for the rapidly changing field of media art.

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Gauging the impact of media art on another established field of inquiry, philosophical aesthetics, Dario Marchiori outlines the contours and pitfalls of what has come to be known as media aesthetics. Differentiating between the concepts of *medium* – a set of techniques of (artistic) expression – and *media* – a network of technologies of communication – Marchiori shows how the emergence of media art tests the limits of the classical conception of the aesthetic as a reflexive experience as first described in the 18th century by Baumgarten, Burke, and Kant. Taking stock of the varied nature of media art, Marchiori abandons an object-specific approach for a more flexible and inclusive understanding of media aesthetics as a set of reflexive practices that account for both the material and experiential complexities of our current media environment.

In her final contribution to part I, Cosetta G. Saba addresses the problem of defining media art from the vantage point of digital preservation and storage. Drawing on some of the key texts from archive theory and media archaeology, Saba discusses the difficulties involved in storing and retrieving time-based media artifacts and artistic practices. Developing the concept of *transcodification*, Saba uses a number of examples to discuss the challenge involved in documenting media artworks that can only be transferred to a digital storage format at the price of a loss of the ephemeral and experiential dimensions of the work. By outlining the difficulties of making non-storable elements of media artworks retrievable after all, Saba contributes another key element to a working definition of media art for the subsequent parts of the book.