

Rethinking Curating

Art after New Media

Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook

foreword by Steve Dietz

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Foreword

At some point soon after I had founded the new media art program at the Walker Art Center in 1996, I was speaking with the museum director, who said words to the effect that to her eye, Net art just wasn't visually compelling. I responded with words to the effect that maybe (certainly) Net art wasn't "about" looking like the painting or sculpture or installations or video or film or performances normally presented at the Walker, despite its institutional predisposition for the avant-garde in multiple disciplines. Maybe (certainly) it was about, for instance, interactivity, networks, and computation as much as about how it looked. To her credit, she "got" the general point and seemed to accept it as a legitimate argument about how to approach a new art form, even if she never fully immersed herself in the specifics or embraced the art form itself.

I wish I had had this book then.

My subsequent experience ranged from curating the online Net art *Gallery 9* and commissioning collaborative installations by Raqs Media Collective with Atelier Bow-Wow in a multidisciplinary museum context to presenting large-scale, interactive, and participatory public art such as Akira Hasegawa's *D-K San Jose* in a multidisciplinary biennial context. The scope of these contexts means that the scope of the understanding also needs to be broad. *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, however, clearly articulates an often obfuscating set of issues, including the internecine debates that too easily divide what Lev Manovich refers to as Turing-land (so-called new media art) and Duchamp-land (so-called contemporary art). Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook rigorously differentiate and compellingly reintegrate the competing claims of these two camps so that we can focus on what really matters: the art.

Rethinking Curating is based not only on the authors' own extensive curatorial work in a wide range of contexts, but also on a generous accumulation of community knowledge and experiences. The online program that Beryl and Sarah run, the Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss, or CRUMB, is the source of much of this community-based praxis, but the authors also range far and wide from other Net lists to contemporary art theory. Although perhaps not their primary intention, this book reminds me of the

Whole Earth Catalog or, perhaps a little closer to home, *A Concise Lexicon of / for the Digital Commons* by Raqs Media Collective. Both crystallized a certain cultural moment not with abstract theory, but with an almost exhaustive cataloging of actual experience by a community of practitioners. In *Rethinking Curating*, the sheer depth and breadth of intelligent reflection among a dedicated, global group of loosely aligned peers belie every summative, simplistic question or statement one has heard or made. “How much does it cost?” “What’s new about it?” “Why is it art?” “What’s next?” “It’s about process.” “It’s computational.” “It crosses boundaries.” “It’s new.” These questions and statements are not “bad,” but in this book Beryl and Sarah give them the context they deserve—the context necessary to move on to the real-world questions and issues of working with dynamic and emerging contemporary art.

This book is, of course, more than a compilation—more than an oral history of a merry band of pranksters knocking at the gate. It ultimately is a subversive and passionate argument with two prongs: it’s not a book about new media, it’s about art; it’s not a book about curating new media, it’s about rethinking curating.

Graham and Cook strategically define so-called new media as a set of behaviors, not as a medium. Once you go down this road, it becomes readily apparent that a similar strategy is equally useful for much of contemporary art. At one time, the new media of photography both changed the aesthetic understanding of painting and participated in the creation of a cultural understanding of (fixed) time and representation. At another time, the new media of video changed the aesthetic understanding of film while participating with television in the creation of a cultural understanding of (real) time and distance. The art most recently known as “new media” changes our understanding of the behaviors of contemporary art precisely because of its participation in the creation of a cultural understanding of computational interactivity and networked participation. In other words, art is different after new media because of new media—not because new media is “next,” but because its behaviors are the behaviors of our technological times.

Similarly, although pragmatic issues attend the curating and presentation of the art formerly known as “new media,” from bandwidth to special ports that may need to be opened in a firewall to allow passage of a certain Internet protocol, there is also the exciting opportunity for new modes of curating of any art form, from collaborative to participatory to algorithmic, and in any setting, institutional or alternative.

The book is thus both a bridge and a goad. It is a bridge to the so-called contemporary art world, whether institutionalized or alternative, in that it lays out so clearly and knowledgeably how the art of Turing-land is both completely consonant with and as distinctive as any other art practice from Duchamp-land, whether it is conceptual or video or performance or activist. Once this realization sinks in—that art in general has been altered after and by new media, or more broadly in “technological times”—it becomes a goad to rethink one’s curatorial practice at least to be more inclusive and more repre-

sentative of all of the art of our times. And I believe this to be equally true for curators in either “country.”

I often joke that the problems of curating the art formerly known as “new media” are self-correcting. Everyone who isn’t a fish swimming in the aquarium of these technological times will eventually die off, and what is strangely disorienting now will become the normative context for a new generation of curators. If we read this book, however, we may lead a more upstart and blissful life.

Steve Dietz

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