

New Media Art, Participation, Social Engagement and Public Funding

Maria Chatzichristodoulou

Abstract

This article investigates the current condition of new media art in Britain, examining how cuts to arts funding have affected the art form's infrastructure and capacity for survival and growth. It considers media art in relation to other contemporary art practices, particularly in relation to its inherent capacity for enhanced and sustained user participation, and asks why it is that, though government agendas favour participatory art as 'socially useful', media art appears to have been hit harder than other art forms. The article puts forward four reasons that could explain this paradox, and argues the importance of the survival of new media art, not as isolated practices invited to exist within mainstream contexts, but as a distinct art form.

Keywords

*Media art died but nobody noticed.*¹

One: an art pronounced dead

In a review of the Transmediale 2006 Festival, Armin Medosch described how 'media art died but nobody noticed' when the festival that year decided to 'silently' drop the term 'media art' from its title. 'For the diligent observer of the field of media art this does not really come as a surprise', Medosch argued, 'but merely represents the ongoing confusion and blatant opportunism which marks contemporary production in the digital culture industry.'² Medosch was proven right in identifying and highlighting a continuous trend that was still to deliver severe blows in this field of practice internationally, and in the United Kingdom most notably. This 'silent drop' of a distinct term by a festival distinguished in this very practice was followed by the considerably more vocal closure of the Live and Media Arts Department at London's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the end of November 2008. Its then Artistic Director, Ekow Eshun, generated heated debate among the press, numerous mailing lists and communities of practice when he declared as the reason for this closure that, 'in the main, the art form lacks depth and cultural urgency'.³ In offering his damning report for a whole range of practices, Eshun did not distinguish between live and media arts, which he conflated as a single art form, nor did he articulate his reasons for pronouncing both forms superficial and culturally irrelevant at the same time.

'New media art' – a field also known as 'media art(s)' and 'digital art(s)', among other denominations – has long been contested not only as a term, but also as a distinct genre of artistic practice. In 2001 Stefanie Syman, in an article about the exhibition Bitstreams at the Whitney Museum (New York, 2001), suggested that '[j]ust as dot.com was always a fatuous category, lumping together media, corporate services, and infrastructure companies into one "industry," digital art is a category of convenience that should be retired'.⁴ And so, it seems, it

was – if not the art form in itself then certainly its funding sources (or a big part thereof). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the contested terms that refer to media art practices or attempt to defend the genre's depth and cultural relevance; in any case, both have been done before.⁵

Whatever new media art is or is not, two things are certain: a) the art form (as well as the self-reflexive discussions that have accompanied it ever since the first euphoric approaches to technology were replaced by post dot.com scepticism) still exists and continues to develop in a range of directions; b) the recent funding cuts have badly affected media art practices, already experiencing a considerable reduction in funding through policy changes. This article will briefly examine the impact that funding cuts have had on media art and ask why it is that it appears to have been hit slightly harder than other art forms.

Two: social media and the art of participation

Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook describe new media as 'being characteristically about process rather than object',⁶ and suggest that relevant practices are less fixed, both in space and time, and in terms of their authorship.⁷ This, I think, is one of the most important aspects of media art practices: it implies that they are not primarily concerned with aesthetics, as other art practices might be, but with functions. Furthermore, curator Steve Dietz has identified three categories that characterize new media art on the basis of the processes of *interactivity*, *connectivity* and *computability* (I would add *participation*).⁸ These processes are often prevalent in media art not so much for their artistic or social intent, but because of the inherent potential of the media themselves. Unlike the practices of painting, sculpture, photography, still installation and so on, which remain more or less fixed in space, media art, much like live performance, uses technologies that are inherently *in process*. Computational technologies are time-based; they are potentially open to continuous input and, therefore, change. Networking technologies such as the Internet and social media, as many-to-many media (though, clearly, by now highly surveilled and controlled), have an inherent dialogical and participatory potential. I suggest therefore that new media art as a genre⁹ is not just concerned with process over outcome, but *is in process* owing to the media this form employs as its means of becoming manifest in space, in time or in networks. Further, the genre's procedural quality is what renders it potentially open to interaction, connectivity, participation or intervention – that is, particularly apt to inviting various forms of active user engagement. Eleanor Carpenter argues something similar: 'The connected and modifiable behaviours of new media art ... enable interactive, participatory and collaborative artworks.'¹⁰

There are several different ways users can actively engage with a work of art. The terms used to describe those varying types of engagement are not interchangeable (though they are often mistakenly used in this way), and denote different levels, qualities or types of user engagement. Graham and Cook offer some definitions, attempting to provide clarity in distinguishing between the different terms.¹¹ In their view, interaction is about 'acting upon each other' (though the authors point out that the term is often mistakenly used for simple 'reaction'),¹² participation involves having 'a share in' something,¹³ whereas collaboration implies 'the production of something with a degree of equality between the participants'.¹⁴ Furthermore, Anna Deuze proposes the term 'do-it-yourself' artwork for work that can become actualized only through user participation.¹⁵ Deuze traces the 'do-it-yourself' artwork's art historical trajectory from Fluxus to new media art, and suggests that 'do-it-yourself protocols can be classified along an axis spanning two extremes of constraint and openness'.¹⁶ She thus focuses the study of user

engagement on the degree of the work's openness, while the work itself is seen as embodying 'a realm of possibilities' as opposed to 'the fixity of conventional solutions of the "perfect", "classical" artwork'.¹⁷

Neither 'do-it-yourself' artworks nor media art practices are or purport to be socially engaged (though specific types of media art such as tactical media are directly engaged with social matters). Nevertheless, several media art practices aim to provide platforms for exchange and collaboration between users; bring communities together by facilitating networking and exchange; encourage engagement in political or activist practice through the use of the Internet, mobile and networking technologies and social media; provide media literacy and open software access and know-how, challenging capitalist platforms for ownership and 'closed' systems (e.g. open source artworks, art hacking workshops); or generate collaborative creativity through providing platforms for active collaboration and individual contributions (e.g. through community user-generated projects). So, though media art practices are not socially engaged per se, they are characterized by a set of relevant approaches and processes. Graham and Cook refer to Stuart Nolan, who asserts that political participation and new media participation are closely linked,¹⁸ while Carpenter has identified a range of connections between what she terms 'New Media Arts' and 'Socially Engaged Arts', which she has summarized as follows.

An emphasis on process rather than object.

Tools and systems as social and technical actors.

A critical view of participatory and collaborative systems.

A concern with political intent and complicity.

A tension between strategic (quietly subversive with long-term goals) and tactical (quick interventionist response) approaches.¹⁹

I would suggest that media art practices are characterized by an inherent dramaturgy of participation. The question is: is this a 'good thing'?

Three: social turn and the art of being useful

Politicians and contemporary art curators ... are prone to using the words *interaction*, *participation*, and *collaboration* with the vague sense that they are 'good things'.²⁰

Claire Bishop, through her influential article 'The Social Turn', introduced the term to describe a 'mixed panorama of socially collaborative work' which, she argues, 'forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life'.²¹ In tracing understandings and practices of participation through both social and artistic movements, Bishop considers how 'the issue of participation has become increasingly inextricable from the question of political commitment',²² and suggests that since May 1968 (identified more as a landmark rather than an actual date) participation has been 'hailed as a popular new democratic mode' in artistic as well as social circles.²³

While Bishop acknowledges the value and social relevance of relational, socially engaged and politicized practices, she has also produced a critique of the ‘social turn’ in the arts. She suggests that socially engaged art is characterized by generic anti-capitalist values and a ‘Christian good soul’, which demands that ‘art should extract itself from the “useless” domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis’.²⁴ But the aesthetic, Bishop argues following French philosopher Jacques Rancière, is ‘the ability to think contradiction’ in terms of sustaining a productive tension between the art’s autonomy (art for art’s sake) and its inextricable connection to ‘the promise of a better world to come’ (art with social purpose). Without the aesthetic, says Bishop, ‘art is valued for its truthfulness and educational efficacy rather than for inviting us ... to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament’.²⁵

Recently Bishop has furthered her critique of contemporary art’s social turn to suggest that it:

designate[s not only] an orientation towards concrete goals in art, but also the critical perception that these are more substantial, ‘real’ and important than artistic experiences. At the same time, these perceived social achievements are never compared with actual (and innovative) social projects taking place *outside* the realm of art; they ... derive their critical value in opposition to more traditional, expressive and object-based modes of artistic practice. In short, the point of comparison and reference for participatory projects always returns to contemporary art, despite the fact that they are perceived to be worthwhile precisely because they are non-artistic.²⁶

Furthermore, Bishop argues, participation in Western social and artistic contexts now has more to do with ‘the populist agendas of neoliberal governments’, than with a challenge of hierarchical structures, social equality and freedom. This is certainly not intentional on the part of the artists who develop participatory practices: they, in general, take a stance against neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, says Bishop, in opposing ‘individualism and the commodity object’ formally in their work, they fail to recognize that other aspects of their practice ‘dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism’s recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labour)’. As a result, ‘far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it’.²⁷

Bishop’s arguments have generated numerous discussions and heated debates. Whatever one’s own position, however, those arguments are important to consider. As public policy on arts funding takes an increasingly instrumentalist approach, leading to studies of the perceived monetary value of the arts in various, often conflicting or contradictory, terms, the current trend increasingly justifies Bishop’s concerns that participatory art unwittingly serves the very political agendas it sets out to challenge, question or counter. In his report *Big Society: Arts, Health and Well-Being*, Clive Parkinson notes that ‘marginalised people who take part in these inspirational projects are more connected, more active and critically, more able to engage with life beyond the boundaries of illness’.²⁸ He suggests that those findings are important for the government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda, and that, if the government genuinely wants to engage with diverse communities across the country, it should support grass-roots cultural engagement.²⁹

The Culture and Sports Evidence Programme (CASE) has confirmed evidence that engagement in sports and art increases subjective well-being, and that there is a link between arts participation and educational attainment.³⁰ John Knell and Matthew Taylor, in analysing the CASE report, point out the importance of the ‘intensity’ of the experience, ‘particularly in relation to attainment’,³¹ and suggest that the sector should be explicit about its ambitions ‘in terms of raising not just audience figures ... but also increasing active participation’.³² Participation thus is becoming less of a ‘vaguely good thing’³³ and more of a specific and

targeted concern for arts funders and, as a result, for artists. The latter, while struggling to survive despite austerity measures and funding cuts, attempt to justify their art projects through referencing evidence that social value is linked to particular types of artistic experiences that are perceived as ‘good’ or ‘useful’ (e.g. interactive, participatory, immersive, socially engaged).

The discussion about audience participation in contemporary arts cannot ignore technological innovations, which have the potential to facilitate new and enhanced types of engagement. A report commissioned by the Arts Council England, alongside Arts & Business and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, confirms that ‘the Internet is changing the way we consume, share and create arts content’, augmenting (rather than replacing) live experience. As a result, the report suggests, arts and cultural organizations ‘are faced with a dizzying array of opportunities for broadening and deepening their engagement with their audiences’, using the Internet as ‘a marketing and audience development tool, but also a core platform for ... distributing content and delivering immersive, participative and fundamentally new arts experiences’.³⁴ Some of the experiences delivered through the Internet relate to experiences taking place in ‘real’ space (or what the report calls ‘live experiences’), whereas others can be unique to the online environment, such as ‘a work of digital art or an online game’. Furthermore, the report confirms that ‘there is an appetite for the sector to innovate and create a new generation of experiences that take advantage of some of the Internet’s unique characteristics – however challenging that may be given the current round of cost-cutting’.³⁵ So networking technologies are seen by arts funding bodies as crucial for the development and delivery of innovative participatory experiences, and digital arts and gaming are considered welcome additions to other types of participatory cultural deliverables.

Since digital technologies are, undoubtedly, major ‘players’ in the shift towards participation in contemporary arts, it is interesting to note that, for all her influential and extremely valuable discussion on participation, Bishop has completely omitted to refer to new media art or artistic and cultural practices in general that make use of digital and networking technologies to engage audiences in more ‘intense’ experiences. Indeed, she has often been criticized by media artists and curators for her lack of engagement with the field, and accused of a certain lack of sophistication in her discussion of processes that are fundamental to media art and shared by other participatory practices such as, for example, the notion of interactivity.³⁶ Bishop herself admits her shortcomings in relation to furthering her discourse in order to include arts that employ new technologies.³⁷ Even so, the fact remains that one of the main theorists analysing participatory practice in contemporary art bypasses the field of media art, despite its obvious relations to participatory and socially engaged practice. This is not the first time that media art has been excluded from discussions about contemporary art that clearly relate to it: Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential, yet much criticized (by Bishop more than anyone else) book, *Relational Aesthetics*, similarly failed to refer to a single artwork that created relations through technological networks, telematic technologies or other media (the book predated social media, at least).³⁸ This leads to a paradox: media art is, as discussed, inherently participatory, yet media art is excluded from discussions on participation in contemporary art.

Furthermore, I have shown how participatory art, and art that makes use of digital technologies to create innovative participatory or immersive experiences, is deemed ‘good art’ by funding bodies – at least in terms of its potential social value. It is ‘good art’ because it is *useful art*, which can produce tangible and measurable social benefits rather than relying on aesthetic qualities, artistic excellence or conceptual innovation. Why is it then that new media art, despite its inherent capacity for participation, is excluded from relevant discussions? Why is it that, despite their creative and critical use of digital technologies to create innovative participatory

and immersive experiences, media art organizations have seen their funding cut more than other art organizations within the last few years?

Four: cuts and the art of accessing public funding

2008, the same year as the closure of ICA's Live and Media Arts Department, saw one more significant closure for the field of new media art in the UK: the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) withdrew funding from the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS). The AHDS was not directly related to media art; it was a national service that aimed to 'collect, preserve and promote the electronic resources which result from research and teaching in the arts and humanities'.³⁹ Nevertheless, its aim of preserving collections, encouraging their use and making them available through online catalogues was relevant to digital art as an academic discipline and the field of digital humanities more broadly. The AHRC withdrew funding eleven years after the service's launch, reasoning that, today, there is no longer a need to support digital arts and humanities as distinct areas of practice and research. Digital technologies have infiltrated everyday life and affected our ways of working to such an extent that all art practice and research integrates, employs or is informed by them to a greater or lesser degree:

The context within which grant funding was initially made to AHDS has changed. Council believes that arts and humanities researchers have developed significant IT knowledge and expertise in the past decade. Much technical knowledge is now readily available within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), either from IT support services or from academics. Therefore, the institutions themselves generally have the expertise they need to handle their own data services.⁴⁰

Two years later Arts Council England closed its Media Arts Office, which had been part of the Visual Arts Department. Unlike the ICA's dramatic public disavowal of media art as an art form, that closure took place quietly with no public announcements. Nevertheless, as a result of these changes two of the main funding bodies that consistently and strategically supported research and artistic projects that integrated new media and digital technologies ceased to exist, with nothing to replace them.

In 2011 the Berlin-based cultural association Les Jardins des Pilotes commissioned a survey about funding for media art internationally. Though the survey 'does not ... offer a comprehensive list of funding structures and their history in the different countries',⁴¹ it does provide some interesting and indicative findings. Annette Schindler, who conducted the survey, makes clear that the timing was not accidental: it was commissioned at a time of major funding cuts for arts and culture in the UK and the Netherlands. The aim was to consider whether the 'fundamental changes taking place in these countries ... are part of a broader development',⁴² and what such developments might entail for media art as an artistic field and a cultural discourse. The survey also aimed to identify any international trends that might emerge across geographical borders.

The survey conducted twenty-three interviews with experts in media art from thirteen different countries, and concluded that 'media art is at stake'. This was owing to changes developing at 'high pace, intensity and depth', which concern various aspects of the art form beyond the public funding structures that support it, such as 'its conditions of production' and 'its self-understanding as a field of art and a discourse'. It also concluded that the funding situation for media art differed substantially from country to country; so much so that no overall findings

could be drawn in relation to funding structures and infrastructure. In the UK, the survey concluded, the small-scale infrastructures of media art make it particularly vulnerable to the recent major cuts to arts funding. The survey compared the economic climate for the arts in the UK to that in the Netherlands, and foresaw the likely closure of ‘a large number of institutions’ in both countries. Comparing the state of media art funding in the UK and Netherlands with the international situation suggests that those two countries ‘take the most extreme position of disadvantage for media art. In no other country do negative developments of this scope seem to be looming.’⁴³

In the British context, the survey points to the cuts to arts funding announced by the Arts Council England (ACE) in March 2011. These included the complete withdrawal or substantial reduction of funding for 1,480 small cultural organizations, sixteen of which belonged to the field of media art (which is already massively under-represented compared with other, more traditional art forms). The organizations that completely lost their funding had long track records of producing, creating and commissioning innovative digital/media art projects. They include: Access Space, ArtSway, DanceDigital, Folly, Four Corners Film, Isis Arts, Lovebytes, Lumen, Media Art Bath, Moti Roti, Mute, Onedotzero, Performing Arts Labs, Picture This, Proboscis, PVA MediaLab, The Culture Company and Vivid.⁴⁴ ACE also announced an 11 per cent reduction of public funding for the Foundation for Arts and Creative Technologies (FACT) in Liverpool, one of the few remaining institutions to be consistently concerned with the production and promotion of media art in Britain.

Cuts to the arts in Britain hit all art forms. Indeed, cuts to media art appear to be consistent with the overall pattern of the cuts, which hit visual and combined arts the hardest: out of the 200 cultural organizations that saw their funding being removed altogether, 24.8 per cent were visual arts organizations, followed by combined arts at 21.8 per cent.⁴⁵ Furthermore, cuts to arts funding in the UK were, and are, part of wider public-sector cuts that have also hit higher education, local government, social care, the voluntary sector, children’s services, regeneration, infrastructure and the National Health Service among other services. Cuts to arts funding must thus be considered within the wider context of extreme challenges being placed upon public life in the UK overall. Social Policy Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby points to the International Monetary Fund’s latest predictions which suggest that ‘by 2017 the UK is set to have the lowest share of public spending among major capitalist economies, including the USA’.⁴⁶ The consequences of those policies for people on low income have been widely analysed; Taylor-Gooby points to predictions of an increase in poverty on the order of 2.3 million by 2020,⁴⁷ as well as increase in job insecurity, stagnation of wages (particularly at the bottom end) and greater housing problems.⁴⁸

Within this wider context funding cuts inflicted upon media art might not appear misaligned or overtly harsh. Nonetheless, one needs to consider that withdrawal of funding from this particular art form first became apparent as a consistent strategy some years before 2011, and before similar cuts in the wider sector. Furthermore, the closures of funding bodies or strands of relevant cultural infrastructures that I have pointed to occurred abruptly, within a brief period of time, with no exit strategy, no transition plan and no long-term plan put in place for services and infrastructure.⁴⁹ The AHRC’s suggestion that digital art and digital humanities are just arts and humanities that use digital technologies and thus no longer need targeted support, as all arts and humanities use those media and technical infrastructures, is deeply problematic. Several practitioners, theorists and curators still see media art as a distinct art form that integrates technologies at the heart of its ontology, so that its content, form, aesthetics, functions, ethics

and philosophical outlook are largely shaped by those media.⁵⁰ Not all practices employing technological means can make this claim (at least, not yet).

While both the inherent participatory potential of media art and its capacity to engage with technology creatively and critically are being ignored,⁵¹ Claire Bishop, in yet another controversial article, 'Digital Divide' (2012), laments the fact that contemporary art has been 'curiously unresponsive to the total upheaval in our labor and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution'. Though many artists use digital technology, says Bishop, hardly any 'confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital', or 'reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence'. Bishop, once more, ignores media art as an art form (and is seemingly unaware of the work of many of its practitioners), setting it aside in a single sentence as 'a specialized field of its own', which 'rarely overlaps with the mainstream artworld'.⁵² Though the article generated numerous responses on *Artforum* and yet more heated debates in mailing lists such as CRUMB by proponents of media art, the paradox remains: why is it that, on the one hand, media art is constantly and, seemingly, strategically, sidelined, its infrastructures diminished, its funding cut, its position in the art world understated, undermined or even negated, while on the other the contemporary art world's lack of creative engagement with and critical reflexivity of the digital as our current context and condition is being lamented?

Five: the threat of new media

To this point I have outlined some tensions or paradoxes, and posed certain questions in relation to the role and status of new media art, primarily in the UK, but also in Europe and internationally. Here I address these tensions and propose four main reasons which, in my view, have led to a) the art world's dismissal of media art as a set of valid and important artistic practices and b) the withdrawal or severe limitation of public-sector funding for the art form by governmental bodies in the UK and elsewhere, despite its advantage in relation to agendas of participation, public engagement and digital innovation.

First, Patrick Lichty, in his response to Bishop's 'Digital Divide', identifies 'a *strategic disavowal* of digital art and New Media as an (inflated) threat to the objective art system'.⁵³ In his view, Bishop both expresses and acknowledges a *fear* of 'rapid technological change, especially in the high art world as it creates environments of exponential scale and destructions of preciousness'.⁵⁴ Though Bishop does not directly refer to issues of scale, originality and scarcity (the fear she alludes to is more metaphysical and relates to the inherent 'humanness' of different artistic media), she does point to Lev Manovich's argument that, 'in foregrounding two-way communication as a fundamental cultural activity ... the Internet asks us to reconsider the very paradigm of an aesthetic object',⁵⁵ and asks whether 'work premised on a dialogic, "prosumer" model, seeking real-world impact, needs to assume representation or an object form in order to be recognized as art'.⁵⁶ Lichty chooses, perhaps unhelpfully, to focus on the issue of technophobia, rather than to address the loss of the single-author object-form made to sit within a gallery context through dialogical, user-generated processes. Furthermore, he assumes a 'comfortable' position by proclaiming that media art is, in fact, present in the art world – just not where Bishop would notice it (the question is, who does notice it and is this enough?). Even so, he clearly has a point: other artists and curators have also identified the art world's fear of digital technology as an artistic medium – which is quite distinct from technology used as a promotional or commercial tool – in relation to the art form's (non-)commercial viability as the main reason for its exclusion from mainstream contemporary art contexts.⁵⁷ Lichty compares the

threat that media art poses to the art world to the threat music downloads pose to the recording industry to suggest that the art world has been ‘dig[ging] its heels in the pre-digital/analog to preserve the hallmark of value, and that is the principle of scarcity’.⁵⁸

Second, Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics approaches art as ‘the place that produces a specific sociability’,⁵⁹ or ‘a state of encounter’.⁶⁰ Relational aesthetics is a theory of the ‘emphatically *social* constitution of contemporary art’,⁶¹ whereas relational artworks are conceived as ‘autonomous communes, even if they are actualised only momentarily’.⁶² In this sense, relational practices ‘radicalised’ the gallery space by shifting the focus from the (marketable) object to the (non-marketable) visitors to the exhibition, turning them and their relationships into the ‘object’/subjects of the exhibition.⁶³ These relationships or ‘communes’ are, of course, only momentary, fleeting social constructions, utterly dependent on the gallery setting. Unlike ‘real’ community art practices – such as Boal’s concept of the theatre of the oppressed, which aims to invoke positive social change through raising and addressing issues of citizenship and oppression with affected communities – relational art does not seek to implement social change. Despite ‘idealising ... sociality as a resistant mechanism’⁶⁴ it does not, in fact, seek to implement *any* change at all outside the gallery setting.

Although media art practices are diverse in form and outlook and by no means socially engaged overall, their participatory potential, coupled with their networking capacity, allows the works to expand beyond the gallery/museum context and into the space of everyday life. This capacity renders the works potentially unmanageable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. So, whereas relational arts are ‘sexy’ in their ability seemingly to ‘radicalize’ the gallery space while in fact remaining distinctly un-radical and even apolitical in the changes they propose, media art has the potential to initiate, facilitate or perform an actual change in the gallery that is not temporary but sustainable, and that can seep outside and beyond the gallery space and into real life (especially as networks become increasingly enmeshed with everyday life). The capacities of media art to facilitate real social relationships and form communities, render them sustainable, extend them beyond the cultural ‘bubble’ and ‘blow’ them up in scale, pose significant challenges to the *modi operandi* of the art market, the art world and the cultural sector at large. Relational arts ‘radicalize’ the gallery space; media art presents us with the possibility of actualizing connections, synergies, relationships and collaborations that can be, if not necessarily radical in themselves as political acts, then radically challenging to curators, institutional contexts, and funding bodies. After all, though governmental bodies acknowledge the benefits of active participation in the arts and encourage such practices, it is no surprise that they can be wary of participatory practices that have the potential to empower communities to articulate and perform sustained critical – let alone oppositional – practice.

Third, in her discussion of participatory art, Bishop criticizes a context whereby aesthetic aims and outcomes are considered ‘useless’, and the work is judged and valued on the basis of its potential for social impact – when, in fact, this social impact is never measured in comparison with other social projects, but only in comparison with other art practices. Bishop’s criticism of the instrumentalization of arts practice is extremely important; nevertheless, her discussion of aesthetic integrity and the aesthetic value of participatory art as an aspect of the work divorced from, and on occasion oppositional to, its politics and social relevance is baffling. Though it is fair to demand that a work of art is judged in relation to its aesthetic as well as other functions, and that it contributes to the artistic discourse it positions itself within, it is also fair, I think, to acknowledge that different types of practice operate within different sets of aesthetic, social and political discourses: art discourse is not the hegemonic, singular structure that Bishop’s discussion would sometimes have us believe. Participatory practices can indeed pose particular

problems in terms of their (re/)presentation within a gallery setting. This applies not just to participatory works but to all works concerned primarily with process rather than outcome, such as ‘do-it-yourself’ artworks and, indeed, media art practices.

Socially engaged or not, media art works that rely on networked connections and encounters can be amorphous, dispersed, difficult to pin down through representational strategies and uncontainable within a ‘white box’ setting. Works that use as their materials ‘connected and modifiable behaviours’⁶⁵ are never fixed in time, space, and matter; they are malleable, changeable, in process. Ultimately, such practices are challenging to present and represent in a manner that is inherent in the work’s social project and at the same time concerned with some form of ‘beauty’. Bishop, despite her reliance on Rancière’s discussion of aesthetics as ‘the ability to think opposition’, fails to think opposition herself in insisting on approaching a work’s aesthetics as distinct or even divorced from its politics. Rancière, on the other hand, talks about aesthetics as ‘a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships’.⁶⁶

Despite what Rockhill has argued are fundamental contradictions in Rancière’s discussion of the relationship between art and politics,⁶⁷ and the confusion the philosopher’s work allows to ‘slip in below the turgid surface of [his] pronouncements’,⁶⁸ Rancière’s approach to aesthetics is much more inclusive of a work’s different functions (‘doing and making’) than Bishop’s discussion might suggest. Indeed, reflecting on a participatory or media art project’s ways of ‘doing and making’, their ‘corresponding forms of visibility’ and the possible ‘relationships’ between the two is crucial in developing an aesthetic system that is relevant to those particular practices by acknowledging that their social, political, connective or networking functions generate the forms (or challenge the ‘*a priori* forms’) that render the work presentable to ‘sense experience’.⁶⁹

Finally, the fourth reason for media art’s continuous consignment to the peripheries of artistic practice is techno-fetishism; in 2007 Andreas Broeckmann argued in an interview about the new edition of the Transmediale festival he was then directing, that ‘the techno-fetishism of the 1990s in media arts has subsided’ and ‘a growing number of artists ... employ their media in a very conscious way’.⁷⁰ In the same year media theorist Geert Lovink suggested quite the opposite: ‘new media arts still operate in a self-referential ghetto, dominated by techno-fetishism’.⁷¹ Whether we choose to believe Broeckmann or Lovink about the more recent developments of the art form, there is little doubt that associations with techno-fetishism have tarnished its practice and reputation. Media art has long been perceived by art critics, curators and institutions as focused on the ‘next new thing’ of technological innovation, at the expense of content, sophistication or artistic intent. Self-referentiality, self-reflexivity and ghettoization have meant that relevant festivals, exhibitions and showcases can sometimes feel to the external observer or non-aficionado as something akin to incestuous affairs, where small ‘gangs’ of people (/geeks) are recycled as practitioners, curators and audiences in contexts that appear insular and impenetrable. Media art is indeed changing – in two ways: as Medosch suggested with direct reference to Transmediale 2006, some of the curators and practitioners involved in the field opted to ‘jump off’ what they saw as a sinking boat by dropping the term, aligning themselves with the mainstream art world and suggesting that media art is not a distinct genre – just art that uses media; others remained loyal to the media art discourse and chose to act as proponents of the field, seeking to distance it from technophilic attitudes while opening it up to wider constituencies. The penetration of digital, networking and mobile technologies among a massive percentage of the population in advanced economies has made it easier for media art to drop its ‘obscurantist’ approach⁷² and seek to engage with much wider constituencies, inspiring and enabling people ‘to become active co-creators of their cultures and societies’.⁷³

Conclusion

This article has asked two main questions: first, if we accept that new media art is, potentially, inherently participatory, and since recent/current governmental agendas favour participation in the arts as ‘socially useful’, why is it that cuts to arts funding have hit media art harder than other art forms? Second, if we accept that new media art engages with the digital both critically and creatively, and since current government-commissioned reports have identified an appetite for innovation in this field, why is it that the art world ignores media art while lamenting its own disengagement from digital technologies? I have offered four reasons that could address the paradoxes raised in those questions. First, the art world is afraid of digital technologies; this fear is both metaphysical (fear of art that is ‘inherently alien to human perception’),⁷⁴ as well as practical (fear of the high-speed changes technologies can introduce to the art world’s and market’s *status quo* and *modi operandi*). Second, unlike ‘relational’ work that seeks to create momentary ‘communes’ within the gallery space,⁷⁵ media art has the potential to initiate, facilitate, support or sustain communities beyond and outside cultural ‘bubbles’ and into the sphere of everyday life. Such art propositions can be ‘radical’, unmanageable and occasionally even threatening to the very agendas that seek to encourage participation. Third, media and participatory arts are currently evaluated on the basis of an aesthetics that seeks to divorce the work’s form from its social, political, connective or networked project; we therefore need an aesthetics/politics of participation that can embrace messy, elusive and disruptive practices that challenge dominant understandings of aesthetics and allow those to be evaluated on their own terms. Finally, media art is also a victim of its own technophilic and ghettoized attitude that has often kept it in a silo, divorced from other contemporary art practices; luckily, the evidence of current practice is that media art is increasingly engaging with wider audiences in innovative and inclusive ways.⁷⁶

The questions surrounding the current status and future fate of new media art in the UK and Europe are not simple; they are as complex and diverse as the practices themselves. Even so, as demonstrated herein, media art in Britain is suffering at this historical moment because it gets lost in the gaps between government policy on art, culture and participation, on one hand, and the traditions, values and limitations of the art world, on the other. Government policy supports participation and digital innovation but does not acknowledge the value of media art as a distinct art form and is wary of its potential to generate an ‘excess’ of critical, tactical or oppositional participation through facilitating and sustaining communities (of practice, of resistance). And the contemporary art world chooses to ignore media art as an art form (although it does, on occasion, incorporate individual, isolated practices) as it poses direct threats to established systems of aesthetics, politics and markets.

I here argue for the importance of media art, not as isolated practices that are occasionally invited to mainstream panels and art fairs (Lichty’s comfortable attitude will not do in that respect), but as a distinct art form. The reason this is important is the very reason media art is threatened with being sidelined or supplanted by practices that are more ‘traditional’, in some form or other: it poses certain challenges and threats to established value systems; its inherently networked potential renders it ‘risky’ and unmanageable when placed within institutional settings; it requires new approaches, critical vocabularies, modes of expertise and understandings; it can offer engaged, intense and novel participatory experiences that are socially useful in a range of ways; and it challenges what it means to be ‘human’ through constantly redefining the notions of creativity, agency and originality. New media art as an art

form – I quote Bishop in addressing her own questions – thematizes ‘the total upheaval in our labour and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution’, ‘confront[s] the question of what it means to think, see and filter affect through the digital’ and ‘reflect[s] deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence’.⁷⁷ Media art practices need to be recognized not for sentimental reasons, but because they are *socially useful* in critically and creatively engaging with our civilization’s current condition of being in digital times. The contemporary art world, decision-makers and cultural policymakers would do well to consider the importance of the form’s survival, while the media art community itself must appreciate that there is no time to waste in incestuous, navel-gazing practices. This is important, as new media art is today called to challenge and contest established – and elitist – agendas of both the current British government and the art world at large.

Notes

1 Medosch, ‘Good Bye Reality!’.

2 Ibid.

3 Eshun in Quinn, email to New Media Curating mailing list.

4 Syman, ‘On the Beginning of the End of Digital Art’.

5 See Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*; Lovejoy, Paul and Vesna, eds, *Context Providers*; Paul, *Digital Arts*; Tribe, Jana and Grosenick, eds, *New Media Art*, among others. Also see some illuminating and in-depth discussions in online forums and mailing lists such as Rhizome and CRUMB.

6 Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 5.

7 Ibid.

8 Dietz, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists?’; also Dietz, ‘Signal or Noise?’.

9 As a genre, but not as specific practices, as there are several exceptions to this generic rule.

10 Carpenter, *Politicised Socially Engaged Art and New Media Art*, 22.

11 Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 112–14.

12 Ibid., 112.

13 Ibid., 113.

14 Ibid., 114.

15 Deuze, ‘Introduction’, 12.

16 Ibid.

17 Dezeuze cites Brazilian poet and critic Haroldo de Campos's concept of the 'open work of art'. De Campos, cited in "'Open Work", "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork and Bricolage', 49.

18 Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 114.

19 Carpenter, *Politicised Socially Engaged Art*, 248.

20 Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 112.

21 Bishop, 'The Social Turn'.

22 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 74.

23 Ibid., 79.

24 Bishop, 'The Social Turn'.

25 Ibid.

26 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 19.

27 Ibid., 227.

28 Parkinson, 'Big Society'.

29 Ibid.

30 Bunting, *Culture and Sport Evidence Programme*.

31 Knell and Taylor, *Arts Funding, Austerity and the Big Society*, 25.

32 Ibid., 30.

33 Graham and Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 112.

34 MTM London, *Digital Audiences*, 44.

35 Ibid.

36 Graham and Cook, 'The Behaviors of New Media'.

37 Bishop, 'Digital Divide'.

38 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

39 AHDS, 'What is the AHDS?'.

40 AHRC, 'AHRC Announcement'.

41 Schindler, *Media Art Funding Survey*.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 CODA, 'Letter to Arts Council England'.

45 Rogers, 'Arts Council Cuts Listed'.

46 Taylor-Gooby, 'UK Heading for Bottom Place on Public Spending'.

47 Brewer, Browne and Joyce, *Child and Working-Age Poverty*, as cited in Taylor-Gooby.

48 See Brewer et al., *Who Gains from Growth?*, as cited in Taylor-Gooby.

49 Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan, 'A Discussion on the Subject of Intimacy in Performance, and an Afterword', 213–34.

50 Ibid.

51 Mariátegui, Cubitt and Nadarajan claim that, throughout its formative period and beyond, media art practice put emphasis on a critical relation to television and mass media, as well as a positive relation between art, science and technolog. 'Social Formations of Global Media Art', 218.

52 Bishop, 'Digital Divide'.

53 Lichty, 'A Disjointed Conversation', emphasis added.

54 Ibid.

55 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 163–4.

56 Bishop, 'Digital Divide'. Bishop also points out that this is a concern applicable not only to media arts, but to a range of contemporary art practices dealing with, among other forms, assemblages, 'unmonumentality' or selection and archival strategies.

57 See Dietz, 'Collecting New Media Art'; Quaranta, *Media, New Media, Postmedia*.

58 Lichty, 'A Disjointed Conversation'.

59 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.

60 Ibid., 18.

61 Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', 371.

62 Ibid., 371.

63 This was not original as an approach; Allan Kaprow's Environments, for example, performed a similar function.

64 Kraynak, 'Rirkrit Tiravanija's Liability', 167.

65 Carpenter, 'Politicised Socially Engaged Art and New Media Art', 22.

66 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 10.

67 Rockhill, 'Rancière's Productive Contradictions'.

68 Davis, 'Rancière, for Dummies'. This confusion, Davis argues, is exactly what makes Rancière as a philosopher the 'darling du jour' of the art world.

69 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13. Rancière here follows Kant's definition of aesthetics.

70 Broeckmann, in Mancuso and Cippitelli, 'Andreas Broeckmann, Contemporary New Media Art'.

71 Lovink, 'New Media Arts at the Crossroads'.

72 See: Lovink, *Zero Comments*.

73 Furtherfield, 'Vision'.

74 Bishop, 'Digital Divide'.

75 Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', 371.

76 Prominent examples of relevant organizations in the UK include Furtherfield (London), Lighthouse (Brighton) and FACT (Liverpool).

77 Bishop, 'Digital Divide'

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Maria Chatzichristodoulou (*aka Maria X*) is a cultural practitioner (curator, performer, writer) and Lecturer in Performance and New Media at the School of Drama, Music and Screen, University of Hull. She is co-editor of the volumes *Interfaces of Performance* (Ashgate, 2009) and *Intimacy across Visceral and Digital Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). She has published numerous book chapters and journal articles, and has lectured widely. Maria was co-founder and co-director of the international media art festival *Medi@terra* and *Fornos Centre for Digital Culture* (Athens, 1996–2002); co-convenor of the *Thursday Club* (Goldsmiths University of London, 2006–9); initiator and co-director of the festival and symposium '*Intimacy: Across Visceral and Digital Performance*' (London, 2007); and co-director/co-convenor of several other conferences and symposia including '*Becoming Nomad*' (York St John University, 2013). She is currently working on a monograph that explores performance practices that develop within networked environments.