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Interrogating New Media: A Conversation with Joyce Cutler-Shaw and Margot Lovejoy

Deborah J. Haynes

We live in a poly-centered world, where virtual technologies have created new definitions of self, place, and community. The boundaries between disciplines are breaking down, creating crossovers between art and science, art and natural history, art and the media, and crossovers among the arts themselves. Traditional definitions of the so-called high arts and mass culture are blending. A continuum exists between artists who use new media as a tool for scanning, experimenting with images, and the like, and those who use new technologies as an art medium, exploring the potential and using it in innovative ways. New digital technologies lead to both optimism and deep concern about our future. They offer artists and others unique access to vast amounts of information, as well as opportunities for participation in a much wider world than artists even twenty years ago could imagine. Yet these technologies also may result in ethical problems and paradoxes that we would do well to confront directly.

This text evolved as a series of e-mail dialogues, enriched by in-person real-time conversation. Because the arena of the visual arts, ethics, and technology is so broad, our discussion focuses on the role of the artist, the function of art itself, the meaning and evolution of identity in this era of avatars, cyborgs, androids—the post-human—and particular ethical issues raised by artists' engagement with technology.

Deborah Haynes (DH): I would like to begin by asking you to consider how the artist's cultural role is evolving. How does artists' engagement with new technologies encourage reflection about the ethical issues and dilemmas of our time?

Margot Lovejoy (ML): Our choices about how technologies are used influence the future of human and cultural development. While scientists and technologists believe that advances in technology allow for progress in understanding, unlocking worlds of knowledge, allowing for new forms of empowerment and opportunities for human development, the role of critics and artists has always been to challenge its effects on society. Critics are concerned about the potential manipulation of public consciousness implied by uses of new media and the many cultural losses that come with it. However, for artists there is a paradox: Those who wish to comment on the contemporary are also bound to use the new media tools that are available to them because these are expressive of our time. Today they allow artists' works to be disseminated to larger audiences. In seeking to develop new forms of expression, many artists are deeply influenced by the potential of new media to seek direct public participation as essential to the meaning of their work.

Access to the Web throughout the developed and developing world is growing rapidly. By using the Web as a medium, artists are being challenged to change their language from a "high art" vocabulary to one that may reach extended mass culture audiences. The artists' role in this extreme moment of change has also shifted in many ways. There are many examples of public art that speak to social and environmental problems, such as global warming, the pollution and disappearance of aquifers, the preponderance of cancers. Mel Chin, working with scientist Rufus Cheney, created *Revival Fields* and other ongoing experimental environmental installations, which use plants to absorb toxic metals from the soil to return landscapes devastated by pollution to life (*http://greenmuseum.org/ c/ecovention/sect1.html*). The Critical Art Ensemble examines issues such as reproduction and who owns the Internet (*www.critical-art.net*). New electronic media makes it possible to literally expand artists' ability to reach out within the larger culture. Those using new media seek to find the means to raise ethical questions about significant issues we face in contemporary society.

Joyce Cutler-Shaw (JCS): I tend to consider virtual technologies as disconnected from particular moral values. It seems that groups and individuals use virtual technologies for whatever they consider most important. These technologies can be used by those with right-to-life

perspectives, with anti-evolutionary positions that are faith-based, or by those who want to promote pornography. I see virtual technologies as instruments for value persuasion, either intentionally or not.

I am most involved at present with medical uses of virtual reality. In the medical field, fascination with the imaging potentials of new technologies is a driving force. An example is the newest development in sonography. Images created through sonography surpass the earlier hazy, hard-to-read fetal images that float in a pyramidal structure. The newest images are closer to the precise representational renderings of a Leonardo da Vinci fetal drawing, but in three dimensions.

Such virtual images, however, tend to eliminate the woman's containing body and diminish the significance of the umbilical cord. Instead of identifying the fetus as a connected, dependent pre-person, such images can reinforce a visual argument for the fetus as a person. This, of course, has significant political and personal repercussions for women who advocate for our primary ownership of and responsibility for our own bodies. The imaging technology is not consciously designed to reinforce a political perspective. But its representational forms can reenforce a particular interpretation with moral implications.

I recently experienced a vivid example of how imaging technology shapes our behavior and interpretation of an event when I was privileged to witness a birth. The woman was in near term labor with her fifth child. No family members were present. Her vital signs were continuously monitored and displayed on a screen. The attending nurse moved a computer mouse across her abdomen to watch the movements of the fetus on another screen, but the woman herself was ignored. There are serious questions about the human consequences of technological advances. What was on the screen was medically vital, but it was not the pending newborn. It was an image, immediate but virtual. The woman was present and real.

DH: You seem to suggest that the technology acts to dehumanize us, just as it simultaneously is useful. Could you say more about this paradox?

JCS: Internet and Web-based dialogs such as listserv conversations have great potential. I am part of an eco-dialog with an expanding group of invited participants. It began with about ten or twelve of us and was dynamic and intimate. Although specific issues now generate useful and informative exchanges and a greater diversity of viewpoints, the group has grown to a point where we do not all know each other. This has to some degree diminished the original sense of intimacy, but issues still stimulate immediate and thoughtful responses. The nature of this medium as we are

using it now encourages, and can over-encourage, spontaneous exchange. The speed of its network potential can be valuable. It can also be embarrassing if we respond too quickly without thinking.

Another example of the potential of this medium for reflection is the emergence of alternative political sites, such as Bagnews.com. Bagnews features political cartoons from the left, blogs that offer visual analysis of current news images, and links for response to other left-leaning political sites. With the technological potential for manipulating images, and the increasing sophistication of public persuasion by manipulated images— from clothing to models to politicians, cars, and cereal—our ability to read, analyze, and respond to the virtual is increasingly challenged.

DH: Do you mean that we must be especially sensitive to this capacity for manipulation and even seduction by new media? And how do issues of the digital divide and unequal access to new technologies relate to this issue?

JCS: I believe that these divisions of generation, age, and class are crucial. We are increasingly divided by extremes of wealth and poverty, education, race, and ethnicity. If we believe in social justice, equality of opportunity, and the underlying principles of a democratic society, then such issues are important for artistic investigation. At the most basic and obvious level, unequal access divides us and is basically unfair and unethical in a purportedly democratic, constitutionally based society such as ours.

It is more imperative than ever that we become visually literate. For example, we used to speak of the president or others in public life as persons, and to identify them as particular, existing, physical selves. At some point in the not-too-distant past we started to refer to the image of the person, and to hear news analyses about their presentational qualities, as if of an obscured or concealed person. We are encouraged, if covertly, to present ourselves persona to persona, rather than as a "real" self to another self. I stress this phenomenon because I identify the ethical with the authentic and with social responsibility. Communication technologies have great potential for the groundswell of engagement by the like-minded. We see this with the coalitions of the religious right, the pro-choice and anti-abortion movements, the political activism surrounding Howard Dean's early presidential campaign in 2004, and anti-war demonstrations organized on the Internet.

ML: Artists without access to the Internet are at an increasing disadvantage because it is now the prime method of communication within programs of educational and art institutions. Especially if they are designers, artists will be left "out of the loop," unable to compete in contemporary

commercial spheres, because they don't have access to what is widely available to others: timesaving text-and-image software where new visual languages and forms are being developed. In the 1990s, industrialist George Soros recognized the importance of founding programs for electronic development in Eastern Europe. He understood that cultures lacking artists and scientists trained in the use of new technologies would fall far behind. While there is an effort to provide some access for Third-World countries, it is clear that this digital divide has major ethical dimensions.

The ethical dimensions you speak of are also defined by the extremely open nature of the Internet. In his essays about the relationship between art and technology, Walter Benjamin warned that new mediums could be used for fascistic purposes just as much as they can be used for progressive thinking and analysis.[1] We are clearly seeing today how TV can distort the news. However, we know that challenges and responses to these forms of misinformation can be broadcast immediately online by anyone with an Internet connection. We live in a time when these battles are multiplying and occur daily because of the technological potential. Yet, this potential allows for the short-circuiting of institutional control. Television, museums, and galleries can no longer limit access to exhibiting or transmitting one's work, one's ideas, and one's political views. It remains to be seen how the general public will be able to confront the ethical issues that will continue to arise, as there are many dangers, including hacking and identity theft, which must be faced.

DH: But this freedom you are talking about can also become addictive. The addiction to virtual technologies seduces and controls artists, as well as the general public, through creating pleasurable and entertaining experiences. Social issues can be manipulated to create a culture of fear, which is immensely dangerous. Life in what I call "actual phenomenological reality" may seem more difficult and conflicted than life on the screen. What do you see as the broader ramifications for our lives?

ML: Technology is not going away. We must learn to live with its prevalent dangers in increasingly urgent and complex ways. Although it seems slow, the public is becoming more and more educated about the dangers of political rhetoric and misinformation, particularly in Europe where the media is not so controlled by corporations.

Regarding artists, significant work by the best artists encourages exploration of one's values and encourages public responses of all kinds, including a critique of the media itself. Net art covers a wide range of complex projects that require viewer participation and collaboration.

Digital media provide easy access to research and knowledge, faster and wider dissemination for artists' work, as well as the ability to communicate easily in their daily lives. These media encourage creation of community, including the growth of artists' connections to one another through home page links.

JCS: Yet, it also becomes easy to enter the virtual realm and to respond as if to the actual. I believe there is a connection to the recent phenomenon of scale escalation in imaging. Newspaper and magazine ads for rings and bracelets and watches show them in the wrist and hand size of giants. Technological models of the human body are escalated in scale, as the walk-through heart in the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. This is so different from my experience of holding a human heart in my hand or witnessing a heart transplant. When the surgeon held the newly severed heart in his hand, so disciplined was its human function of continuously pumping blood that, even severed, for some moments it continued to beat. The sight took my breath away.

Or, there is an anatomical model in the Science Museum in Los Angeles, about fifty feet long with visible, light-flashing, internally-motorized moving parts. One hundred twenty people can surround her. I am about the size of a big tumor in her body. How can one relate such a sophisticated and entertaining display to one's physical self? In many cases the ramifications are a distancing from phenomenological reality. In the medical field we are increasingly identified as graphs and scans and high-key colored plasticized parts. The human person is losing out as a primary determinant of scale.

DH: You are talking about the dehumanization of the human, or transformation of the human. Indeed, the meaning and evolution of individual identity is changing in this era of avatars, cyborgs, robots, and the "post-human." We can manipulate ourselves—as images, persons, a species. What are the ethical implications of artists undertaking bionic changes, becoming cyborgs, or exploring robotics?

JCS: This is an area of particular interest to me, given my role as artist-in-residence at the School of Medicine at UC-SD. The underlying first question for me is, what does it mean to be human? What are the parameters of the "normal"? New technologies, for facial and body reconstruction, for addressing physical deformity as well as responding to personal vanity, make possible a physical transformation that is always calibrated against an imagined ideal and/or a projection of physical advance. Consider Michael Jackson's physical transformation. Dissatisfied with his natural self,

at a certain midpoint he transformed into an attractive, light-skinned African American. Pushing his visage to an extreme, he is at the more radical edge of what is possible in individual body re-imaging. Having visited many medical and anatomical museums, including those of teratology (i.e., of the aberrations of the human form), I believe there is a certain range of variation in characteristics of Homo sapiens that are considered normal. These shift from culture group to culture group, depending on the particular accepted range of physical and cultural characteristics or features. Then there is the projected group "ideal" or range of "ideals" that make many hearts beat faster. In the United States these ideals are inventions of advertising, fashion media, and notions of Hollywood glamour. For me the ethical implications are contingent upon understanding what we consider to be within the range of the normal. This is a large arena for artists' exploration.

ML: In her 1995 book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle speaks about how the Internet allows for free and hidden experimentation with different identities or avatars, and how necessary this can be especially to young people in a new age living between the real and the virtual.[2] Other sociologists comment that new generations, always driven to develop their own identities within their particular generational time frame, must experiment in ways that sometimes seem too expansive and extreme. Nevertheless, this is understandable, given the rapid change in technological standards that we are experiencing with their inevitable social and psychological effects.

On one level, science-fiction films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) with its android population or *Gattaca* (1997), which deals with genetic tinkering of offspring DNA, allow for investigation of what it means to be human or for experimentation about the form of future societies. The same is true of other films, such as *2001* (1968), *A.I.* (2001), and *Minority Report* (2002).

On another level, the dramatic works that artists such as Eduardo Kac (*www.eduardokac.com*), Stelarc (*www.stelarc.va.com.au*), and Orlan (*www.orlan.net*) are creating offer powerful and thoughtful critiques of the ethical dangers we face. Artists, fascinated with the growth of artificial intelligence and robotics, are creating not only new kinds of art experiences, but they are also using these technologies to engender serious commentaries about their misuse.

To this list, I would add the following Web artists. Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas developed a project in 2002 titled "Transaction," which examines media politics (*www.transaction.lt*). Wayne Dunkley maintains a site titled "The Degradation and Removal of the/a Black Male"

(*www.sharemyworld.net*). And Josh On and the Future Farmers developed a project dealing with technology and social issues (*www.theyrule.net*). All of these artists, and certainly many others, urge us to reconsider definitions of and cultural values around identity and power relations.

DH: Given these challenges to traditionally defined identity, what then is the nature of the artist's ethical responsibility in a networked culture? Or, phrased another way, for what is the artist responsible and to what community?

ML: On the Web, artists are responsible not only to themselves and their community, but to a global audience outside of the usual cultural communities, to a popular mass circulation of images and projects without regard to traditional "high culture" language and control. This is territory where they may turn spectators into collaborators. In my own Web works, this principle has grown in importance. For example, my TURNS project (*www.myturningpoint.com*) asks you to participate by submitting a narrative about yourself in response to the question it asks: "What event changed your life?" The work can't exist without the authentic participation of others. To paraphrase Stephen Willats in *Art and Social Function*, our emerging collaborative culture should be founded on networks that encourage exchange and mutuality, fluidity and transience. As he wrote, "The realization that all 'art' is dependent on society—dependent on relationships between people and not the sole product of any one person—is becoming increasingly important in the shaping of future culture."[3]

JCS: I think this is a hard question to answer, especially to the degree that an artist works out of individual intent. Ethical responsibility involves social responsibility, which links one's local context to a larger global one. Many of our cities and even local communities are composed of diverse cultural groups. But in some cases we are disconnected geographically and socially from those who are different from ourselves. If one believes, as I do, that primary artistic expression involves one's authentic voice whatever the medium, and that this is the voice of one's truth, then one way or another it is a human and communicable expression that can be shared and widely understood. This ideal, of course, is far from much of what is being expressed. There is a pervasive attitude that new media is exploitable—a medium of disguise, subterfuge, and cooption. We see the visual dazzle of surface rather than substance. Temporality is crucial. If you time images on the TV screen, there is rarely one without movement for more than a few seconds, if that. Speed and swift movement characterize our commercially

mediated world, and TV is the source of most people's news. Screens now feature two, three, and four centers of interest with continuously moving text lines. However, these characteristics can be serious impediments to contemplation, critical thinking, and interpersonal connection.

DH: What you have said suggests that we all must consider how virtual technologies create consumers who buy first and think later. In addition, we have barely touched on some of the other challenges of a culture that is so wedded to the ubiquitous screen, such as physiological changes, effects on our mental functioning, and on the sense of touch. Some of us wonder if problems such as short attention spans in young people are related to the speed of television images, computer games, and the ease of cut-and-paste. Clearly, we have to learn and to teach others to see. Though we live in a context where visual images are ubiquitous, we are not visually literate or critical enough.

ML: Yes, we do have huge challenges to face in a society that is so invaded by consciousness transforming media. So far, most attempts to bring awareness of these problems into focus for the general public have been restricted to university courses in sociology, psychology, and film studies, where students learn to critique and analyze media. In England, education about TV and film analysis started in high school years ago. We need to encourage dialogue and debate about significant current issues in early childhood education, along with training in the ability to analyze and problem solve. A few children's games on the Internet, such as those by feminist Mary Flanagan (*www.maryflanagan.com*), are focused on building this kind of ability.

What we face is a question of political resolve and financing that will be difficult to achieve, given the present political climate. The potential to educate the public in these issues lies paradoxically with use of the media itself. However, this requires either wresting control of the media from the corporate sphere or showing how companies can benefit from supporting vital forms of public education. Ethical values that we claim to have today should not just become captive to the political rhetoric we are currently experiencing.

JCS: Visual literacy takes time, training, perceptual acuity, and a critical perspective. It is a necessary educational challenge, if we truly value depth in our understanding of the world around us, our place in it, as well as an ability to respond critically to our visually saturated, commercially co-opted environment. I find increasing evidence of visual intelligence and ethical perspectives in artists' new media work that is refreshing and hopeful.

DH: It is, of course, difficult to summarize such complex ideas as we have discussed here. Definitions of art, interpretations of the cultural function of the artist, and even the meaning of the self are changing rapidly under the influence of new technologies. We have tried to elucidate some of the ethical issues that arise when such fundamental categories are transformed. New technologies have the potential to be consciousness transforming, but they can also function to diminish the critical and analytical abilities of the viewer and user. Ultimately, the direction of the future will depend upon our collective and collaborative efforts to address the ethical dilemmas posed by technology in its many guises.

Endnotes

[1] See especially Walter Benjamin, "Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 220–238. A comprehensive resource list about these issues is also available in Margot Lovejoy, *Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

[2] In Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 10.

[3] Stephen Willats, *Art and Social Function* (London: Ellipsis, 2000), 7.