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One Cache Memory of New Media in China¹

The world of art collection and criticism seems just as agog with China these days as regular reportage on politics and economics. And perhaps the coverage is deserved, because the synergy between its bullish (dragonish) economy and various socio-cultural and political forces has continued the boom of China's art world. Hardly a day seems to pass without an art celebrity from China making headlines in some foreign collector's collection or some international art fair. Even in the near future, Chinese art favorite Ai Weiwei has invited over one thousand fellow Chinese to Documenta 12 as a part of his latest work. Ai's invitees ostensibly come from a wide swath of society, including the unemployed, farmers, and students; which brings to a point something that the art press often belies: the other countless Chinese artists that do not make the art coverage. In fact, despite the clichéd "hotness" of China's art scene, except for a handful of art celebrities not much else is known. This lack is compounded in the case of China's burgeoning New Media art scene, which like its overseas counterparts maintains its resistance to collection and its niche status for curation. To this end then, what does New Media in China look like? Who produces New Media art, and under what conditions? This essay seeks to provide one glance of some of the present conditions for New Media art production in China.

It is important to first briefly define what the term "New Media" entails in this particular situation. For many in the US and Europe, New Media has come to be identified with a particular relationship to information (Manovich),² and in turn, information and its phenomenology produce a new viewer (Hansen)³ – a viewer who is at the center of critical experience, and who becomes both a focus and producer of the art work in its "embodied aesthetic." Works such as Manovich's *Soft Cinema*, Amerika's *Grammatron*, Reas and Fry's *Proce55ing*, among others, all perform as nearly classic examples of the information-embodied aesthetic complex.

This theoretical underpinning does not differ significantly when switching the focus to China: New Media works still function as elucidators of the Groszian reality-virtuality loop by enabling people to question their assumptions in this world of technology and media.⁴ However, beyond this understanding, certain central similarities dissipate rather quickly. Instead of a random database-streaming movie generator (as in Manovich's ideal piece), there are endless streams of semi-connected conversations that create a kind of digital din of voices, all of whom are discussing an embodied-aesthetic in their own way; and instead of code development for open source art, there is a code-driven art practice whose openness is at once a given and deeply protected.⁵ Within China, the set of assumptions that is being questioned differs according to the context, and in tandem the methods used to frame the questions also differ.

The differences between Chinese New Media art in contrast to the US and Europe are frequently explained away by citing conventional political, cultural and economic differences. The danger in doing so is that such explanations do no better than blindly reinforce generalizations while ignoring the very reality of accelerated change that is taking place. For those who get off the beaten path of Beijing's 798 (大山子/七九八) or Shanghai's BizArt and Suzhou Creek (莫干山/苏河), "New Media" mostly means talking about digital animation. This is hardly the edgy, hardware-hacked art that so many have grown accustomed to within mainstream New Media discourse. When the conversation veers away from animation, other more reluctant and pragmatic practices emerge, including web design, broadcast media (think more towards TV effects and YouTube, and away from other forms of web-streaming or podcasting), and other "creative industry" practices on the one side; and mixed-media, performance art, and digital music-sound installation on the other. Thus, while it may be the case that China's current New Media scene appears less critical of various aspects that New Media in the US and Europe take for their bread and butter (most noticeably, certain kinds of political New Media works), it in no way suggests that it is not simultaneously differently critical of other aspects.⁶ Second, any differences in critical content are dependent on the very particular ways that China is developing in parallel with the rest of the world. Given these two assertions, China's development of New Media for the purposes of this essay might best

be observed through its art academies where it is taught and produced. New Media, like all art, is after all much less a *thing* than it is a collection of processes.

For most Chinese art academies and universities the focus of New Media art education is animation and other creative industries. In fact, while I use the term “New Media,” most departments use the title “digital art.” The moniker is not misleading. The somewhat practical focus of these departments is less interested in examining the overall relationship between practice and production, than it is in simply churning out worker-producers. Within these academies, what is generally missing is deeper, qualitative instruction of the operating theories and histories behind particular modes of production and their accompanying aesthetics. The tendency then is to reproduce available aesthetic vocabularies and their tropes, ostensibly without critical examination of their broader, nuanced meanings.



An user manipulates the image while onlookers bear witness in *Mona Lisa's Metadata* at the Second Annual International Art and Science Exhibition and Symposium held at Qinghua University in Beijing, China, 2006. Courtesy and photo credit: Patrick W. Deegan.

In a recent piece, *Mona Lisa's Metadata* (2006),⁷ participants altered an image of the Mona Lisa using optical tracking technology; the stated premise was to offer one possibility for an even more transparent interface. Giving the piece the benefit of doubt, it presumably brings together the triumverate of producer (artist), production (work), and reproducer (the user) by attempting to collapse the last two variables – users re-perform the work, i.e., the audience gives meaning to the production – just as Hansen has argued, and under the certain inescapability of Bataillan analysis. All of this proceeds through an archetype of Western art: the Mona Lisa. None of it engages the larger issues at hand, including feminist theory, postcolonial theory, or globalization, not to mention the range of ontological issues explored in the intersection between art history and philosophy. Even the aforementioned issues of virtual-production that it might address are more likely projected by this author. And yet, these apparent lacks do not point entirely to a sense of art practice without any sensibility of historical praxis. In fact, they point directly to the particular context of production.

The context for production is far more than the clichéd and oblique sense of art production with “Chinese characteristics” – a phrase used to describe all manner of contemporary Chinese phenomena. Rather, it must be understood that by and large, these theories are not taught in digital art departments. While the same pedagogical gaps happen in schools in the US and Europe, the preponderance of top-ranked US and European art programs make it a point to submerge students in courses that confront the histories and theories embedded in art production. Therefore, when Chinese New Media works are reviewed by the Western art press they are often quickly dismissed as amateurish. Yet to do so is hasty – instead of “lacks,” it is important to look at what is taught and how as one means of supplying the discursive backstory.

Many digital art programs begin and end with technical coursework. Courses first teach more conservative techniques such as drawing and painting, while students experiment with computers and other digital equipment in their own spare time. In more advanced courses, digital animation techniques are taught (with a focus on programs like Maya or Flash). Courses do emphasize certain aspects of aesthetics, but they tend to be limited to quasi-timeless examples such as issues of “harmony” between content and meaning, or “balance” between line and color.⁸ And while words like “harmony” and “balance” are rather common in China's visual language, they are often practically vague to the students. Incidentally, and most importantly, the examples that the professors and students draw upon for “balance” and “harmony” are all processed via the rhetoric of cultural advancement, and increasingly, “harmonious society” (和谐社会). Therefore, any discussion of meaning, or an *ethics* of art (and thus, of a meaningful aesthetics), is necessarily a discussion of social, cultural, and political development in China. That is, not how New Media art can be critical of China's physical and ideological institutions using a Western theoretical framework – a not-useless but often disappointing way to approach the topic – but how art produced by these institutions ultimately works in its own idiosyncratic, high individualistic way to support these facets of development. Moreover, whereas more “traditional” genres like 国画 (Chinese brush painting), oil painting, and sculpture are also a part of this debate and call to modernization, New Media art is even more central and more important, precisely because it occupies the intersection between art, culture, society, and technology.

In fact, this is directly in-line with the Chinese government's educational policy that supports the “‘Three Orientations,’ which means education should be oriented towards *modernization*, the *whole world* and the *future*. All the development policies and objectives should be finalized according to the principle [sic], so that the systematic structure, development scale and development speed of education will meet the needs of future social progress.”⁹ Whereas 国画 can adopt new subjects, it is not now generally seen as innately modernizing.¹⁰ Thus, as far as the arts are concerned, the task of modernization, globalization, and the securing of the future in China fall primarily on the shoulders of New Media.

One primary context of production then is the “Three Orientations.” Furthermore, to some extent, a historical-cultural critique is also implied in this policy: a critique that identifies Chinese culture as something *in need* of these three orientations, and Chinese artists as capable of fulfilling this need. Pressure to produce art that furthers these orientations comes from a number of sources, including college art professors who see it as a way to adapt the ancient to the contemporary, students who perform it as a complex and obscure set of identity relations, and industries that seek to hire art school graduates who are familiar with business technologies and global culture. New Media art then is not merely art using digital media, but within China it acts as the locus of cultural modernization and a significant contributor to economic development vis-à-vis the creative industries.

Given this rough framework, pieces such as *Mona Lisa's Metadata* also need to be understood as reflexive statements about cultural interfaces combined with rote technological innovation. Additionally, such pieces exemplify the imbrication between cultural production and economic influence. No matter if the technology used is less than cutting edge, or if its implementation is buggy; what counts is that the piece was made by Chinese, in China, for particularly Chinese goals, but can still be discussed within the framework of conventional Western art criticism (even if constricted).¹¹ In addition, given these

parameters, China's New Media art successfully meets the conditions of New Media art as outlined by both Manovich and Hansen, but to a somewhat different end. The works necessarily address the profound change in the relationship between a person and information (and in the Castells sense, between a society and global networks), as well as the demarcation of the physical body as the ultimate site of change. In effect, the situation of China's New Media art is surprisingly similar to New Media art anywhere else, including the specificity of its interpretative conditions (of which there are also numerous similarities).



Noishanghai's second anniversary performance at LiveBar in Shanghai, China. Jimu performs while Wang Changcun (right foreground) listens. May 27, 2007. Photo credit: Patrick W. Deegan

More importantly, New Media art in China is everywhere, even if almost entirely below the international radar. In a well-known indy rocker bar in Shanghai a sound art collective performs: the various artists that make up Noishanghai all bring their own styles and eccentricities; and as with all artists, each of them must be understood in their aggregated, localized context.¹² It would be of little benefit to form a critique suggesting their art is or is not some aspect in relation to some vague but apotheosized Western ideal, without also determining the how and why that forms the critical basis. In this case, their work is unquestionably avant-garde in a general sense: the vocabulary of aural gestures created by the delicate movements of hands on laptops controlling software is complex and masterfully orchestrated. And in the particular sense of China's avant-garde, it is possible to briefly glance the complexity of arrangements – social, cultural, political, historical, harmonic – within the work: the juxtaposition of sounds and of a New Media that is equally critical and playful. New Media is, here, a joining process. It is the capability to bring disparate activities into accord. In short, New Media art is one version of a so-radical-it's-everywhere art that is deeply affecting China's social fabric, steering cultural production, and making headlines without much notice.

¹ This essay is an early assessment of dissertation fieldwork on the subject of New Media in China, with a special focus on the history of academies since 1995, pedagogy, and national policy. Published at *Art-Signal* 1:1 July/August 2007. Barcelona. <http://art-signal.com/en/issue-1/one-cache-memory-of-new-media-in-china>

² Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. 1st MIT Press pbk. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.

³ Hansen, Mark B. N. *New Philosophy for a New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.

⁴ Grosz, E. A. *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001.

⁵ With regards to the din, consider the ways in which social software in China has so deeply penetrated human interaction, from local bbs's to IM (e.g., QQ and MSN) and others. In the second case I am referring to the particular

hurdles faced by the Creative Commons (CC) organization in China. “Sharing,” whether that means legally or illegally in China is a common practice, except in the case of innovative, especially money-making ventures. In this latter situation, CC has had to work just as hard to encourage “open culture,” as it has had to elsewhere – and perhaps even more so than places like the US, because in China creative output is more directly related to a person’s chances of successfully leaping across the formidable economic chasm between poverty and the “middle class.”

⁶ For an example of a dismissive critique, see: “China’s New Media Art More Media Than Art,” *China Daily*, June 11, 2004. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/11/content_338528.htm

⁷ 覃京燕, 黄莹, 朱向未: 博物馆新观赏体验 – 蒙娜丽莎的元数据; 第二届艺术 于科学国际作品展暨学术研讨会, 2006.

⁸ In this case, the two issues presented occurred on two different occasions: once at a university in Beijing in a course for Master’s students, and once at a university in Shanghai in a course for undergraduates. 北京大学, Interviews with students and faculty, February 2006 and October 2007. 上海大学, Interviews with students and faculty, May 2007.

⁹ Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国教育部). *The 9th 5-Year Plan for China’s Educational Development and the Development Outline by 2010*. Beijing, China, 1997. Emphasis is mine.

¹⁰ More truthfully, 国画 is seen as anchoring an imagined Chinese traditional culture. This should also be juxtaposed to 国画’s role in early-Modern China, as well as its more recent role in post 改革开放 (China’s opening in 1978) and the 1980s Star artists.

¹¹ This last aspect, the transcultural interpretation, is particularly important in that it internally signifies the naturalization and production of global culture (because Chinese art can be discussed using normalized Western global discourse), instead of merely acting as the receiver and receptical of some foreign, imported global culture.

¹² The collective is based in Shanghai, China, and includes many artists, such as 竹韵-JiMu and 王长存-Wang Changcun/2RqP5k, who is already well known in China’s and the international sound art scene. See: <http://noishanghai.org/>