



Geopolitical Subjectivity

Tomas Laurenzo

School of Creative Media
City University of Hong Kong
Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong
tomas@laurenzo.net

Abstract

Rhetorics conceived in geopolitically powerful contexts fail in allowing for the different relationships between art and politics that appear in the periphery. This paper analyzes this from a framework of cognitive capitalism. We identify a need for a sociopolitical vocabulary in new media art rhetoric that takes into account the geopolitical context. By reproducing the center-periphery model, peripheral art is reduced to a dichotomy proper of the modernizing discourse and to the arduous task of developing a replacement of the stories that constitute "the other". Nevertheless, we argue that it is possible to assert the existence of both a distinct reality and the parallel construction of a language that transcends the re-reading of international tendencies from a local or "localist" perspective.

Keywords

New media, new media art, aesthetics, geopolitics, politics.

Introduction

Politics is aesthetics in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and that it makes audible what had been inaudible.

Jacques Rancière, 2004

In order to analyze a cultural phenomenon it is needed to take into consideration its historical, social, and political contexts. However, art's relationship with politics is extremely complex and admits a wide plurality of views.

Rancière's quote casts a first conceptual light onto this relationship: there is an immanent artistic characteristic in politics, for its verbalization of societal processes is inherent aesthetic. Coherently, Luis Camnitzer argues that the Tupamaros – the 1970's leftist Uruguayan guerrilla movement – embodies Latin American conceptualism's most authentic and relevant artwork. According to Camnitzer's argument, there is an undeniable aesthetic quality in, for example, the Tupamaros's military actions, such as the *Toma de Pando*¹.

¹ An episode framed in the Tupamaros's guerrilla warfare in the 1960s. On October 8, 1969, several members of the Tupamaros took by assault the police station, fire station, the tele-

The sociopolitical context has always been a "central aspect" of artistic production, although it "long remained inconspicuous, or even invisible". According to Frie-singer, "It took the great exertions of the context-oriented methods of modernism to return it to the field of view, from which it was hidden, for the most part, by the tendency of bourgeois art appreciation to oversee the social and historical embeddedness of an artifact or an aesthetic approach." [10] It is not, still, until the avant-gardes, that appears what Peter Bürger calls "a new art-based praxis for life", a reaction to the identification of art being the objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeoisie [4].

Even if we assume the immanence of the political context in art production, the characteristic of this relationship is still unspecified. Kenning argues that art betrays itself if it is too direct in its opinion, especially in its political opinion, while Rancière states that "an art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops wanting to emancipate us." [15]

As Steve Klee notes, this discussion on the ambiguity of art does not include explicitly political art in what constitutes an unforgivable reductionist blindness: "If all art that incorporates clear political slogans and demands is dismissed as authoritarian because of its univocality then we will misrecognize those moments when these slogans actually introduce ambiguity into the social by forcing a split in the distribution of the sensible." [15]

This blindness is not explained by, but resonates with the hegemonic centrism of the art discourse analysis. Political art seems to be more common and more easily co-opted by the peripheral artworld.

Coincidentally, Buckley argues that "as a political mode of knowledge, art is powerful precisely for the ways in which it can disarticulate those received or existing forms of political and disciplinary subjectivities (that which Rancière has called the 'regimes of perception')." [3]

Furthermore, the dismissal of political art neglects activism. The militant practice of artists who reclaim certain media, languages, processes, or contexts as their

phone exchange and several banks in the city of Pando, 32 kilometers from Uruguay's capital city, Montevideo.

own. Activist art has played a significant role in creating appropriation techniques and in creating and enabling spaces that, in subsequent stages, permitted artistic appropriation.

New media art, in particular, offers a tremendously rich and effective field for activist art. The somewhat recently coined term *hacktivism* stands for the blending of conceptually subversive new media (“hacking”) practices and politically subversive ones.

According to Blais and Ippolito, the executable nature of new media art – in particular where mass digital media are appropriated – constitutes its differential and more powerful characteristic, since it allows for concrete, active, influence on the world.

In their own words: “Executability has given hacktivists not only an arsenal of new tools but a much wider arena in which to exercise these new powers. Because computers are now linked via a global network, code that affects a single operating system can be redirected to execute on computers around the world. No longer confined to the sanctuaries of gallery and museum, digital work has been executed in government-agency databases, in corporate Web ad banners, and on the hard drives of private citizens.” [2] However, art, activism, or “hacktivism”, by no means emerged with digitality. As Neumark affirms, speaking about Fluxus’s Mail Art: “They not only expanded the boundaries of art, media, and communication, they defi(n)ed them. They traveled not as vehicles, but as meaningful cultural and artistic objects, while shifting the meanings of culture, communication, and art objects in their journeys. The journeys of Mail Art marked a particular configuration of geography and social, economic, and cultural relations; they contributed to a remapping of the relation between art and everyday life.” [7]

This early example of media appropriation showcases the re-configuration that political art may provide: an informed, critic dialogue with the sociopolitical context of the art practice’s cultural artifacts and societal inscription. Such dialogs are transversal to the specifics of the art practices, or, as Matthew Fuller puts it, the specific “art methodology” [11].

The need for context analysis is rooted in the intrinsic dialectical nature of art. In effect, all art is political, for, as Ricœur notes, “praxis incorporates an ideological layer; this layer may become distorted, but it is a component of praxis itself.” [11]

Even if every art production undeniably entails an ideological standing, we do not pose that there are no differences between political and apolitical art, or, we could say, between explicitly and implicitly political arts. A parallel can be traced with interaction: even if every artwork can be deemed interactive, there is a distinctive aesthetic quality in interactive art that should not be left unconsidered.

It is, however, necessary to broaden our scope and discuss some concepts that allow us to introduce some political notions into our new media art analysis dis-

course. We identify a need for a sociopolitical vocabulary in art’s (and very especially new media art’s) rhetoric.

General Intellect and Cognitive Capitalism

A useful model to start tackling the dialectal relationship between art and context is provided by the concept of “general intellect”², first presented in Marx’s *Grundrisse* in a section entitled ‘Fragment on Machines’ (written 1857–8, first published 1939) [16].

The general intellect describes an increasing involvement and relevance of the human knowledge in the work process, and the understanding that “wealth is no longer the immediate work of the individual, but a general productivity of the social body that utilizes both workers and technologies”. [16] The notion of general intellect makes available a political understanding of aesthetics, language, and society by addressing that information – embodied in technical expertise and social knowledge – became a crucial force of production.

Ultimately, the general intellect “is a measure or description of ‘how general social knowledge becomes a direct force of production’.” [11]

In Paolo Virno’s terms, the general intellect is the linguistic cognitive faculties common to the species, which constitutes a new kind of richness: *cognitive wealth* [27].

This cognitive wealth is not synonym with dematerialization. Even, if as Lazzarato notes, “Immaterial labor finds itself at the crossroads (or rather, it is the interface) of a new relationship between production and consumption. The activation, both of productive cooperation and of the social relationship with the consumer, is materialized within and by the process of communication.” [18] It can be understood that “capitalism informational economies tend to involve more materialization and commodification of knowledge and, contra the thesis of dematerialization, increased consumption of what is classically termed as matter (oil, paper, aluminum, heavy metals and plastics).” [13]

General intellect, as a model, leads to the analysis of art’s role as a means of knowledge production, that is, wealth creation, and the dialectal relationship that this has with said artistic processes.

The operation of the general intellect within the society is aptly seen via the thesis of cognitive capitalism. Indeed, since the crisis of Fordism, capitalism has seen the more and more central role that knowledge plays, and the rise of the cognitive dimensions of labor.

As Vercellone notes, “this is not to say that the centrality of knowledge to capitalism is new per se. Rather, the question we must ask is to what extent we can speak of a new role for knowledge and, more importantly, its

² Although there are related concepts, such as Spinoza’s “Common Notion”, or social brain, the General Intellect proves to be especially apt, if only thanks to its framing within Marxism and capitalism theory.

relationship with transformations in the capital/labor relation.” [26]

Cognitive capitalism differs from traditional capitalism in that – as Talankin once said in order to attack Vygotski – it “virtualizes” the concept of tool or that of labor, and allows for mental factors such as culture to be determinations, rather than strict economic factors. [29]

It is indeed striking how Marx’s works and contributions still apply after the crisis of Fordism and Taylorism. In the cognitive capitalism, the valorization of knowledge leads to a new form of capitalism; this valorization operates with knowledge not as a common good, a human acquis, and instead treats it as commodity, as an article of trade or commerce.

Cognitive capitalism is, then, a new stage of capitalism after industrial capitalism, which does not have to rely on the affluence of digital technologies, but, instead, relies on the creation of knowledge and on the economic return of the cognitive dimension of work.

This new stage is built upon a crisis of the labor theory of value. Effectively, the labor theory of value shows how – in the industrial capitalism – the capital appropriated the production and abstracts itself from labor. Labor is operated by the capital in such ways that allow for its commoditization. Thus, division of labor and serialization are instrumented, permitting to measure labor in simple unqualified work units.

In cognitive capitalism this, however, does not apply directly, as the general intellect adopts a “diffuse intelligence” where capital does not seem to play a necessary nor defining role in its creation. Ownership of the means of production is relegated to the background and knowledge becomes central. Knowledge that transcends the expertise in operation of new technologies but instead also involves the ownership of the social processes of creation of new knowledge.

In order to satisfy capitalism’s need of commoditization, *cognitive capitalism is built on artificial scarcity*. This commoditization operates on things (knowledge) that are not commodities, thus, it requires the private appropriation of knowledge.

This artificial scarcity is created by fencing knowledge. This way, knowledge is not set free in the society but, instead, is bounded by intellectual property laws, patents, and secrecy policies that keep it in the private sphere.

It is particularly interesting the role that tertiary education (which is based on public funding) plays in cognitive capitalism. Universities educate cognitive workers to operate in the private sector, applying their education on the creation of value that stays within the companies and does not return to society.

There is an underlying scission between what is *public* and what is *common*. Artificial means of scarcity divide them and prevent knowledge to be set as part of the common; instead, cognitive value returns to the society as the result of a choreographed production, as knowledge–artifacts and not as knowledge (in Flusser

terms: applied scientific text). In this way, knowledge remains in the Marxian reign of need without being able to reach the reign of liberty.

New media art and politics

Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterizes mature liberal–democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc.

Dominic Strinati, 1995. [25]

As we mentioned, new media art’s potential executability has allowed for hacktivism strategies that foster the perennial dialogue between art and politics.

Art is intrinsically deregulatory: it exists – or may exist – on its own epistemological framework, or, we could instead say, on its own ontological universe. However, new media art’s relationship with technology situates it on a peculiar situation, with a unique position to reflect on contemporary political issues.

The interplay between art and the political significance of its materiality is not new. The Italian Arte Povera, for example, was “seen by some as radically political in the late 1960s”, as a direct result of their use of *poor materials*, which “opposed not only the industrial aesthetic of American pop and minimalism, but also all forms of systematic, and hence authoritarian, thinking, celebrating instead individual, lived experience through a ‘new humanism’” [14].

As well as the political quality of Arte Povera resides on, or emerges from, the relationship with the material substratum, new media art’s media appropriation carries a political art discourse.

If we are to discuss new media art’s *politicality*, it is necessary to consider the politics of the appropriation process and not only the specific artistic activities (or methodologies) that this appropriation enables. In this way, while tempting, the discourse of executability or the analysis of affordability, should be postponed.

As Christiane Paul states, “art has always employed and critically examined the technology of its time” [21]. However it is new media art’s appropriation what distinguishes it as a genre [17].

It is no accident that new media art co-exists with cognitive capitalism: both are result of the valorization of knowledge. What capitalism does in terms of commoditization, art does in terms of re-definition and re-edition of its own praxis, and it is in this duality where the dialectal relationship new media art–politics exists: in the orthogonal (if not antagonistic) approaches to knowledge creation and societal administration.

In this analysis it becomes necessary to understand that cognitive capitalism's relation with knowledge is not emergent but politically designed, and in this environment the art practice exists and is adopted and co-opted.

New media art's systematic appropriation – that we call media appropriation – [17], though, is intrinsically and unavoidably political, for it undermines the basic underlying process of cognitive capitalism. It is more probable that it is this ontological antagonism what lies behind new media artworks having “gradually formed a common practice whose objectives allude to utopian theories of social organization lying closer to certain visions of communism, direct democracy and anarchism, rather than to the realities of neoliberal capitalism within which new media are produced and predominantly operate” [24], instead of previous discourses of mere opportunity, exposure, and scope.

Perceptual capitalism

New media art often proposes a systematic logic of dematerialization, as a natural result of the immanence of the digital. Accordingly, a relatively recent term has come into use in the analysis of digital artistic practice: post-digital [6]; although loosely defined, it makes explicit the pervasiveness of the digital realm into cultural production, and effectively states that its omnipresence implies a qualitative change of both the production and its consumption: its appreciation, valuation, and eventual conversion into economic goods no longer depends on, or is related to, its digital quality.

This is often seen as a move towards a more human-centered evaluation of culture, which is, by no means, a requisite, and therefore, a naïve reduction. Instead, post-digital refers to the standardization of the digital in all the aspects of human culture, rendering its digital quality meaningless if considered separately from other values, aesthetical, social, or functional.

This immanence of the digital reminds us of the triumph of capitalism. Žižek recounts an anecdote where an editor asks a journalist (Marco Cicala) to replace “capitalism” with a synonym, like “economy” [30]. This rendering of capitalism as not only the ultimate, but also the *only* socio-political and economic arrangement of society attempts to remove from the framework of analysis the very components of capitalism. *It attempts to establish a post-capitalist discourse.*

We need to be aware of the ubiquity described by these two “posts”, while focusing on (at least some of) the implicit socio-political discourses that these hegemonies carry.

Geopolitical subjectivity

The digital revolution is over.

Nicholas Negroponte, 1998. [6]

However prevalent the forces of globalization are, the automatic translation of centrally³ conceived models, interpretations, and practices, constitutes an eminently political act. Besides the linear acknowledgement of a debatable necessity of historical and context rooting, the construction of a centrally conceived rhetoric is never innocuous.

Postcolonial theory has traditionally recognized the center–periphery asymmetries in the construction of knowledge, with an explicit intention of reclaiming histories that have been neglected by dominant historical narratives. However, postcolonial studies “have been notoriously absent from electronic media theory, and criticism”, being somewhat stuck in an inebriated recognition of “the potential of new technology”. [9]

New media art, meanwhile, poses again a rather unique perspective within the arts for its inherent technical requirements locates it on an axis of usefulness usually alien to the art discourse. Especially when, according to Raunig, activist practices are allowed only if they are “purged of their radical aspects, appropriated and coopted into the machines of the spectacle.” This becomes apparent in “mainstream media, which invariably reproduce only two patterns in reference to insurrection: the mantle of silence or the spectacularizing and scandalizing of protest.” [23]

Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society.

Guy Debord, 1977. [8]

It is under this framework that the need of a geopolitical view of new media art appears. As Garcia Canclini notes, geopolitics refers to large global structures and implies cultural or symbolic power in knowledge practices. It is then a problematic field, a descriptive tool that incorporates a certain asepsis product of its own conscience [12]. Geopolitics can be seen as a tool for uncertainty, as an admission of the Kantian nature of models.

Nevertheless, this pretense for asepsis should not be understood as lack of involvement, for our conceptualization is one of resistance. As Lazzarato states, “to say no is the minimum form of resistance”. Our resistance

³ Central, as opposed to peripheral, originating in the core countries. Anew, within world systems, dependency, and post-colonial theories.

must open a creative process, a process of transformation, of active participation. [19]

The very first “no” that we must say, our first form of resistance, consists on acknowledging that the artistic historical narrative of media arts and its analysis of context interrelation is constructed from within a central perspective. Even the general intellect, as introduced, does not allow for a characterization of the geographical distribution of the social worker, nor it reflects on the implications of such distribution and the relation with the centers of power.

New media art in the periphery cannot be apolitical, for the very appropriation of technology is a political event: *it implies surrendering to an applied scientific text that has been written in the center.*

As art history is written in, from, and for the cultural centers, the characteristics of peripheral art in general, and peripheral new media art in particular have not been analyzed or, at best, have been inscribed on a centrally conceptualized narrative, carrier of colonialist granting of meaning. A narrative that fails, for example, to understand how political art naturally and systematically appears in the periphery (very specifically in Latin America) without creating much (or any) of the ontological tensions that appear in central narratives due the lack of ambiguity.

Camnitzer, in his book “Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation” proposes “conceptualism” as the original process of conceptual and political art [5].

Latin American conceptualism composes an original artistic movement that appeared and expressed itself with its own language, in parallel to central artistic processes.

Yet, as Camnitzer shrewdly points out, “art history is written in the cultural centers” and so, any difference between conceptual art and conceptualism has not been analyzed.

Artistic discourses that emerge outside of the cultural centers of the world, according to Camnitzer, have their own roots and its understanding requires an appropriate historical framework. However, the label “Latin American conceptualism” clearly is “a concession to the hegemonic taxonomy” [5].

In this paper, we do not aim at discussing, or finding, the artistic languages that emerge from the geopolitical periphery, but we rather work in understanding that the sociopolitical and economical contexts always play a defining role in the construction of the (commodifiable) knowledge, the worldview.

If new media art is always conceptual, [17] then the sociopolitical dimension adopts a very particular role. It is in new media art’s relationship with technology where we are to focus; not in the construction of a “purely artistic” language, but in the differencing components of new media art. If we identify media appropriation as the defining path of new media art, and explicitation as it’s most transversal aesthetic quality, [17] which differ-

ences in them appear in the periphery, specifically, in Latin America? Or, what conceptualist new media art entails?

By reproducing the center–periphery model, Latin American art is reduced to a dichotomy proper of the modernizing discourse and to the arduous task of developing a replacement of these peripheral stories that constitute “the other”.

We should reflect on whether the idea of “Latin American art” responds to specific contexts where each region contributes from their cultural and symbolic horizons, or if it is structured according a universal reference frame that contains the concepts of modernity, avant-garde, and progress [22].

Nevertheless, we argue that it is possible to assert the existence of both a distinct reality and the parallel construction of a language that transcends, at least in some cases, the re-reading of international tendencies from a local or “localist” perspective.

The simultaneous appearance in Latin America, of processes that restructure the relationship of art with its materiality, should not be seen as a prefiguration (nor re-edition) of the Italian Arte Povera but, instead, as a genuine instrument for probing reality and for the construction of an autonomous poetic.

In this context we can talk about Latin American conceptualism as a *strategy* instead of a *style*. Even if the style is influenced by the center, the periphery historically has not cared about stylistic nuances and produced conceptualist strategies that focused on communication [22] [5].

In analyzing peripheral new media art, it becomes essential to understand how it calls into question an *arrangement of power* constructed from a hegemonic canon centered on Europe and the USA, that operates as an articulatory axis for interpretation. Specifically, an axis that has to prevent us from the perennial risk of exoticism, a risk always present in centrally constructed art narratives.

Media appropriation in the periphery

*We are annoyingly citing facts of the same species, and doing by imitation what others did in ignorance, to prove that we have studied the lesson.
Imitate originality, as you imitate everything.*

Simón Rodríguez, 1828. [5]

In the periphery, with its contextual conditioning, the *necessity* for originality seems evident. In Simón Rodríguez terms, “we invent or we are mistaken”.

From the assumption of the need of a peripheral new media art constructed from a non-hegemonic discourse we can state that the traversing of the axis technology consumer–technology producer cannot be performed in the same way that it occurs in the center, for the rela-

tionship with technology and its societal inscription are radically different.

Arte Povera proposed the liberation that arises from renunciation, stating – among other things – that art can (re) emerge from a tabula rasa of materiality. Similarly, conceptual art appropriated the meaning and use of tools, of apparatuses produced by technology.

Both strategies implemented an appropriation of the *poetic dimension* of these apparatuses; however, they did not appropriate their *technological dimension*, technology is taken as contextual, as something given. It appears for art to reinterpret, remix, and adopt it.

New media art proposes this technological dimension as part of the sensible, it inscribes the reason, purpose and technicality of the tools into the art practice, “fractalizing” the technology and its products: each change creates new tools and new possible changes, it systematizes serendipity.

It is natural that in a society of knowledge an art language is created from within this knowledge; therefore, it is in the differences of the relation with knowledge where a big part of the need for a peripheral, conceptualist, new media art, resides.

In fact, what is needed is a meta-appropriation: the sociopolitical appropriation of the context that would allow for original new media art, that is, *the appropriation of the processes of construction of knowledge*.

Camnitzer’s aforementioned attempt to inscribe the Tupamaros’s guerilla into an artistic discourse becomes, under this light, more sensible: in the periphery, the political dimension is inseparable from the conceptualist art practice.

As Chomsky stated: “Globalization’ is used within the doctrinal system to refer to a very specific form of international economic integration designed in meticulous detail by a network of closely interconnected concentrations of power: multinational corporations, financial institutions, the few powerful states with which they are closely linked, and their international economic institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO, etc.). Not surprisingly, this form of ‘globalization’ is designed to serve the interests of the designers.” [20]

Coherently, Thomas “argues for an approach which is far more alert to the historically specific forms which it adopted in different periods and places, as well as to the various strategies employed by colonial projects, their discursive successes and existential failures.” [28]

As Alonso states, in his “praise of low tech”, it is fallacious to think that only from the technical possession a critic discourse can be created. [1] What is needed is the creation of differential strategies in the relationship with technology. “Strategies”, as systematization of a “problematic insertion” in the relationship with applied knowledge.

Many of such strategies are possible, from a technical postmodern Arte Povera (both as a reclaim of the low tech and as the proposal of a ground zero for the appear-

ance of new aesthetics) to actively working on the creation of processes of meta-appropriation.

What remain fundamental are the identification of these strategies and, very especially, the understanding of the political stance that they inevitably entail.

Nicholas Negroponte is quoted saying that the Digital Revolution is over; we cannot help but hope that it is just starting.

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Author Biography

Tomas Lorenzo is a Uruguayan artist, designer, researcher and engineer, based in Hong Kong. He works as Assistant Professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. He holds a PhD in computer science and has publications in the areas of art, HCI, Software Engineering and Mobile Robotics; his artworks and performances have been shown and awarded internationally.