

Re: new media, generation

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Quick. What is your first intellectual impulse when you try to define what New Media is? Now think about the first definition that comes to mind when you think of a generation. What if I told you that most of your predictions are both wrong and right? This can only be so because defining these concepts cannot persist in binary terms. Newness applies not only to the form of representation (the medium) but to the idea being represented (the message).

By the end of this text I aim to show you that the cycle of generations have much to do with the elusive definition of the practice we call new media.

Over the past year, almost every discussion I have had on the topic of generations or information communication technologies (ICTs) have inevitably invoked the perspective that young adults tend to be more technologically savvy than older adults. In other words, many people believe that younger people are more capable of using, manipulating and ultimately benefitting from new technologies. Despite the fact that age alone is not a reliable factor for determining one's technological ability this assumption subtly suggests that new media are best appreciated by those with the appropriate technological literacy. It begs the question: can new media artworks really only be enjoyed by those with the technological savvy to create them?

This year's META exhibit expanded my expectations of what constitutes new media. The success of the exhibit is primarily due to the fact that the concepts are just as important as the technology. Undoubtedly, technologies play an important role in many of the pieces, but those technologies were not always at the forefront.

Make no mistake, technology (or the effects of technology) in many iterations were inherent subjects in all of the work presented. Some pieces were decidedly 'low tech' with one artist purporting that "the only technology needed is you" (Slow Internet Movement, Gibbons). Other works in the exhibit put the technologies in the fore (Green Freedom, Aghtar) while others still disguised them (Anthros, Gilbank; A Home Inside a Hexahedron, Thompson & Zorzi) only to have the machines interact with us in organic, human-like ways. In some cases, very little technology was involved in the construction of the work (Mirror Image, Moneta; 10FT, Chang; Upon Refraction, Petro) but the underlying concepts had everything to do with technology. Unlike many commercial applications of new media technologies, the compelling nature of the pieces come from their ability to evoke emotions, tell stories and induce critical reflection.

Extensive writing exists on the paradigms of the art gallery and its ability to create the context in which to interpret art so I will not belabour this point. I do, however, want to draw attention to the power embedded in such an institution to frame the experience of the gallery-goer. I will point out that the work in the META exhibit thrived on creating tension between the audience, the artwork and the institution in a sort of organic feedback loop. By the sheer placement of these works in the gallery context the exhibit was

successful in creating multiple dialogues not merely about technology, but on social interactions.

As I was saying earlier, New Media works are not simply the polar opposites of ‘old media.’ An understanding of the underlying technology is not required in order to engage with new media pieces, therefore, members of the tech-savvy generation need not be the only audience that can appreciate the artwork.

For those that were not able to experience the artworks in their full lustre, do not be fooled by the perception that new media works merely showcase the newest technologies. This misnomer can often become a hindrance to truly appreciating the remarkable dialogue that is generated through the work. The curators’ statement draws upon the symbol of the cloud. It is a complex symbol of the ever-shifting nature of the network of ideas that inevitably emerge, disperse and transform throughout the life-cycles of generations.

At the risk of oversimplifying its message, META is about finding new ways to represent age-old ideas. This has much in common with the cycle of renewal that occurs with the passing of each generation. Each and everyone one of us can be categorized into a particular generation. Scholars may not always agree on how to define our generation and we may not always be aware of how we are placed into these generation classifications. The formation of each generation is an act of cultural *re-generation*. As people age in place a new cohort of individuals emerge to experience, question and ultimately reformulate the ideas of days past.

Each new generation that emerges is not a replication, regurgitation nor is it a reduction of generations past. Today’s new technologies must be decoupled from the basic understanding of what new media practice is today because the speed at which technologies evolve would make such a definition obsolete. Only when this decoupling takes place can we re-interpret and re-present old ideas in new ways.

Congratulations to the 2010 New Media graduating class!