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Reviewed work(s):
(Autumn, 1997), pp. 39-45
Published by: College Art Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/777835
Accessed: 10/09/2012 13:04

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Art Education and Cyber-Ideology

Beyond Individualism and Technological Determinism

Jonathan Harris

In technological determinism, research and development have been assumed as self-generating. The new technologies are invented as if they were in an independent sphere, and then create new societies or new human conditions. The view of symptomatic technology, similarly, assumes that research and development are self-generating, but in a more marginal way. What is discovered in the margin is then taken up and used. . . . These positions are so deeply established, in modern social thought, that it is very difficult to think beyond them.

—Raymond Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form

Rethinking Technology

The alternative responses on which Raymond Williams based his account of the development and deployment of television, which he saw as a social phenomenon from its inception (in contrast to the usual understanding of it as an isolated technical capacity only subsequently given social and intellectual meaning), could valuably be applied within the current attempts to wrestle with the character and import of computer and Internet technologies. Williams concluded that television could properly be understood only if the phenomenon was recognized, at all stages of its development, as the practical outcome of already specific relations of production, distribution, and control in a particular society. It was necessary, for example, to talk of television’s existence in the United States as a specific configuration of, say, technical facilities, knowledges, institutions, and ideologies. Only within a reductive “analytic abstraction” could something presupposed to be television’s “pure technology” be extracted from actual historical and social circumstances and hence become seen as a putatively autonomous, self-sufficient, and “determining” entity. Williams saw such “technological determinism” and the slightly more complex form of explanation he called “symptomatic technology”—in which technical means and knowledges are teleologically seen as “made to order,” solving preexisting economic, social, political, or military dilemmas—as blind alleys that confused, rather than clarified, the issues at stake. There is a salient contrast, then, between the theoretical implications of Williams’s view of television and those of recent claims, for example, that computer and Internet technologies themselves herald the dawn of a new democratic epoch, or promise a “feminization” of global communication systems. Although Williams had also been sanguine about the possibilities inherent within television and later new technologies, including the Internet, his skepticism centered on the likely development of techniques and technical applications controlled by institutions devoted primarily to economic profit or the maintenance of the political status quo. A “technology” for Williams was precisely this: an institutionally embedded “way of doing and thinking,” the managers of which, at every stage, could select or reject feasible developments of technique and application.

According to his view, for instance, television in Britain and the United States had (or was) two distinct technologies: the former dominated by the British Broadcasting Corporation’s “Reithian” notion of “public service” (John Reith was the first and, arguably, still the most influential director of the organization), and the latter by the interests of an oligopoly of commercial corporations. British television (including the BBC) has certainly been (further) Americanized since Williams’s book was published in 1974, but the insights in his study came from time spent in California the previous year, which enabled the comparative analysis. Channel-hopping, shortened attention spans (the earlier forms of propensity to what are
FIG. 1 Lincoln Edwards, *Heated Moments*, No. 1, 1996 (Adobe Photoshop). The work of an undergraduate visual arts student produced by sampling, combining, and manipulating a number of signs designating contested national and ethnic identity in contemporary Britain.

FIG. 2 Alessandro Imperato, *New World Disorder 8*, 1995 (Adobe Photoshop). Imperato is a Ph.D. student and junior lecturer in visual arts at Keele University. His imagery and theoretical interests draw heavily on Brechtian themes of ‘making strange’ settled meanings and narratives by jarring juxtaposition of potent symbols. His work is particularly concerned with international military conflict in the post-Cold War world and rising political and cultural repression in Britain.

It is ... not a question of relating the art to the society, but of studying all the activities and their interrelations, without any concession of priority to any one of them we may choose to abstract. If we find, as often, that a particular activity came radically to change the whole organization, we can still not say that it is to this activity that all the others must be related; we can only study the varying ways in which, within the changing organization, the particular activities and their interrelations were affected.6

The challenge, in opposition to these specious abstracting procedures, was to formulate ways of seeing art itself as fundamentally social: its character neither “caused” nor “determined” ultimately by other systems but distinct and affective within the network of systems constituting “the relationships between elements in a whole way of life.”7

That Special Place: Art and the Art School

Society “as a whole,” though, remains something of an intangible reality, yet one chronically invoked, defended, attacked, and certainly “felt”—in various ways, at certain times, by almost all individuals and groups within capital-
ist nation-states such as the United States and Britain. A discussion of the place of new technologies within the specific “society” of university art departments, though, might begin to shed some light on a general problem that preoccupied Williams for many years: that is, how to understand and value art without coding these practices of method and judgment to forms of either idealist cultural history or crude historical or technical materialism (fig. 1).

For example, although it has been argued repeatedly and insistently that photography, video, and computer technology undermine what Walter Benjamin called traditional art’s “aura” of sacredness, it could be countered that art-world ideologies of individualism, originality, and creativity remain sufficiently powerful (and ineffable) for them to be applied to any artist or practitioner adequately lionized by critics, dealers, and museums (including, for instance, Nam June Paik or Bill Viola). The perennial “creative genius” grand narrative or meta-discourse, therefore, seemingly may take hold of any raw materials it finds, and accounts of the decline or even death of auratic art begin to sound like wishful thinking.

In fact, ever since the emergence of new technology-related “photo-text” or “scripto-visual” art practices in the 1970s, British art schools, on the whole, have found it hard to assess or value this kind of work, which is often produced by women students in institutions dominated by male teachers. Griselda Pollock pointed out that this situation could be explained in sociological terms: “There is in art schools a generation or two of teachers and artists whose sense of art and culture was formed at a different moment from that of their current students. Confrontation with deconstructive practices is found hard to accommodate to their paradigm of art and its appropriate terms of assessment (such as: does it move me?).”

The association of such “deconstructive practices” with the marginal art history or “complementary studies” element of a traditional British fine-arts degree program no doubt made (and makes) it even harder for older teachers—schooled in Neo-Bauhaus modernism, in the main—to understand and take seriously work utilizing texts and mechanical or electronic photographic technologies (fig. 2).

A new undergraduate program in visual arts at Keele University, in distinction from usual British art-school arrangements, locates studio practice teaching within a doubled intellectual context: the subject is split 50/50 between history/theory and studio practice. Since all students at the university study for joint honors anyway, they always undertake visual arts along with one other major academic subject offered in the university (fig. 3). Not laboring under the notion that the course is necessarily
intended to produce (or reveal) "artists," department staff have been able to develop a much firmer sense of curriculum and pedagogic structure than is usual in most British art schools, where students are still left, on the whole, "to discover the artist in themselves."

In their first year, all visual-arts students follow a diagnostic program, learning to work in six areas of studio activity (two-dimensional work, sculpture, installation, photography, video, and computers). Practice teaching also involves an integral theoretical element, usually based on discussion of a text relating to the work for that week. Students undertake a theme-linked history/theory course called "Introduction to Visual Arts in Modern Culture." To attempt substantively to integrate theory and practice, students are required to write essays for assessment within their practice modules while, in the second level of the degree, they submit visual project work as part of their history/theory assessment. During the second and final years of their degree, students are required to maintain two chief areas of studio practice, thus avoiding defensive specialization and promoting sustained engagement with different paradigms of practice (print and computer; video and installation; photography and sculpture, etc.).

Through this requirement students continue to examine and work with both traditional and "new" technological means of production, though neither is fetishized as either primary or redundant. Students are particularly encouraged to use scanned imagery as raw material ("sketches"), which may be processed and reprocessed within a variety of different media and software facilities. Engagement with the imagery and institutions of global mass media (print, television, film, video, computer-generated representations) begins early on in the course, and projects set on topics such as "identity" and "history" draw extensively on both seminar and studio-based resources (figs. 4, 5).

This curriculum and structure (mirrored in a new master's degree called Visual Arts in Contemporary Culture) enables a set of theoretical and practical issues and questions to be raised, which are highly relevant to all art practitioners, historians, and theorists interested in questions of technology and authorship, cultural value and social meaning, modernism and modernization.

Technology, Art, and Value

In his 1961 essay "Modernist Painting" Clement Greenberg famously claimed:

"It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance."

Greenberg formulated this series of influential stipulations in the same year Williams adumbrated his theory of the indissolubility of systems. The two accounts seem almost logically antithetical, and it is easy to see why Greenberg considered abstract painting to be a kind of "proof" for his position (although he later adds caveats on abstract art's status as "continuity"), while Williams devoted himself almost entirely to narrative ("realist") forms in drama and literature. Greenberg's theory of modernist painting could also stand, however, as a proposed description—an ideal type at any rate—of the nature and function of the art school in the 1960s and 1970s.

In Britain most art schools had existed as what were called autonomous institutions until their incorporation within the polytechnics in the late 1960s and early 1970s (the vast majority, though, always financed and regulated by government departments). Their proposed cultural or pedagogic separateness, however, was believed to be both cause and effect, in various ways, of the supposed a priori
status of the artist: the lone, disaffected man of popular (and a good deal of academic) modernist historiography.

For some time in British art schools—though probably only really during the later 1960s and early 1970s—Greenberg’s doctrine of painting’s purity was in happy symmetry with a belief in the purity of the art school: a place seen as uncontaminated by both stifling “academic” (i.e., university) knowledge and a broader unmodern or anti-modern social puritanism and philistinism.13 The subsequent absorption of the art schools into the polytechnics broadly coincided with these institutions’ assimilation of the new office technologies of word processing and data storage which, by the mid-1980s, had aided the substantial down-sizing of administrative staff in the higher education sector. With the removal of the so-called binary divide between the old universities and the polytechnics in 1992 (the latter en masse adopting “university” as part of their titles soon after), all institutions became subject to the financial discipline imposed by the new Higher Education Funding Councils. The assimilation of art-school stragglers continues: Winchester School of Art has recently become incorporated within the University of Southampton, and economies of scale make it almost impossible for small institutions like art schools to demonstrate the kind of financial health demanded of them by recent governments.

The much longer history of this process of economic and bureaucratic modernization, centered on rhetorics of efficiency and control, has been well documented recently by Terry Smith, who attempts to show both the symmetries and asymmetries of social modernization and modernism at work within twentieth-century systems of production and communication.14 It is arguable that modernist art theory, at least in the Greenbergian version derived from readings of Kant, proposed an understanding of the tradition of visual art (usually limited to a discussion of painting, though) as a form of cognitive break or hold precisely on the destructive forces and forms of capitalist social modernization. These, by the 1930s, had produced both mass unemployment and the kitsch of mass culture. Greenberg had attacked these pernicious pressures and energies, of course, in “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (1939), while his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940) began to outline the symbolic space of resistance and transcendence that modernist painting would be claimed fully to occupy twenty years later.

Within this space an ideology of a technology of “doing and thinking” certainly existed—one inherited, Greenberg claimed, from modern art’s continuity with the Renaissance. But the fact of the technology was at the same time virtually occluded: canvas, easels, brushes, paints, and “painting” altogether were represented, instead, as a kind of nature (with the implication of strict, nontransgressible limits). Hans Hofmann’s Greenbergian-

FIG. 5 Alan Schechner, Barcode to Concentration Camp Morph (one of a series of stills taken from the computer animation Taste of a Generation, 1994). Sampling and manipulation techniques allow Schechner to propose connections and homologies between abstract data processing technologies and Nazi regulation and “spending” of human life.

ism avant le lettre had emphasized the kind of “naturalist” ideology underpinning the latter’s metaphorically highly promiscuous notion of “purity”: “an artist is born, and must possess a degree of intuition, profundity and superiority of mind that cannot be taught . . . the artist’s creativity is all but inseparable from that of nature . . . he cares relatively little about the superficial necessities of the material world.”15

The arrival of video and computer art (as opposed to office) technologies prompts the raising of a central question often begged within Greenberg’s later criticism but whose explicit discussion was mostly suppressed: that of the critical relationships between technology, cultural value, and social transformation.16

Beyond Modernist Minority Culture?

For Williams, art was a term to be used to describe any serious attempt to understand the world and was not simply a code word for a priority given to painting, novels, or poetry. The new technologies provided at least an opportunity
to move beyond the entrenched and interlocked positions defending the ideologies of what he called “minority modernist culture” and “mass communications”:

The two faces of this ‘modernism’ could literally not recognise each other, until a very later stage. Their uneasy relation was falsely interpreted by a displacement. On the one hand what was seen was the energetic minority art of a time of reduction and dislocation [Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman?]: on the other hand the routines of a technologised ‘mass culture.’ It was then believed that the technologised mass culture was the enemy of the minority modernist art, when in fact each was the outcome of much deeper transforming forces, in the social order as a whole. It was here that the simplicities of technological determinism and cultural pessimism forged their unholy alliance. The technologies were falsely seen as necessarily carrying this kind of content, while in both action and reaction the minority art despised both of itself and of an alien technological world. 17

The chief proponents of “minority culture” ideology (modernist or not) may once have been lodged—symbolically anyway—in the interwar English faculties at Oxford and Cambridge, but since the 1980s a very similar vein of cultural pessimism, dressed up in “poststructuralist” locations, has emanated from across the Channel. Paul Virilio’s theory of television’s “epidemiological images,” “phenomena of contamination” lacking “content,” and constituting “the society of mass contamination” appears to represent a sort of bastardized Matthew Arnold out of Guy Debord. 10

Jean Baudrillard, talking about image “proliferation” and “a saturation of the field of the medium,” concludes, as one has come to expect, “that everywhere there is communication” impasse. Within the mainstream modernist art, which should be mourned rather than seen as potentially positive elements of a new way of “thinking and doing” beyond “the two faces of modernism” identified by Williams. When the concept of the aura dominates discussion of the character and function of art, the introduction of new technologies can seemingly only constitute a “loss of signification,” what Virilio calls “a seeing without knowing, a bedazzlement,” because the gaze of the camera when linked to a computer is “a self-sufficient gaze, a blind gaze, the machine looking for itself and no longer for some spectator or telespectator.” 21 Through this “hyper-McLuhanism,” in fact, the possibility of there being any specific “content” or coherent intention to particular video or computer-art pieces is precluded: “the screen . . . is superficial, it only communicates images, not a particular time or place. In the end it makes everything circulate in one space, without depth, where all the objects must be able to follow one after the other without slowing down or stopping. But the work of art is made for stopping . . . in the end it is made to interrupt something, to arrest the gaze, to arrest contemplation.” 22

It is certainly an irony, then, that Benjamin’s notion of the aura seems to be as often invoked to defend a notion of traditional art’s sacredness as often as it is used to further the writer’s own ideas of, say, the necessary death of ritual or “the revolutionary functions of film.” 23 It has even been argued that digital video technology—through its ability precisely to store and redeliver an encoded visual message without the progressive degeneration of conventional tape-based editing—could helpfully return to “Video Art” (capitals in original) “some aspect of an originary aura for itself.” 24 Given that video art is now well established as a “respectable” Western fine-art practice, with considerable state funding, dealer interest, along with major museum retrospectives and curatorial departments, it is tempting to argue that, whatever the radical potential within these technologies, the recalcitrant fine-art ideologies of creativity and individualism will continue powerfully to perfume the atmosphere, as Greenberg once said about “avant-gardism,” like “mold spores in the air.” 25

It is apparent that the development and use of these technologies within the traditional fine-art context (for Williams the technology is always already institutionally specific, of course) may involve as many blocks as opportunities. This is because the still prevalent doctrines of the “unteachability of art” and the “ineffable nature of creativity” work significantly to impede forms of intellectual and practical enquiry, which could begin to push cultural production beyond the “minority culture” and “mass communication” impasse. Within the mainstream modernist tradition in the twentieth century, artists holding considerably different views, values, and interests have continued to agree that Art just cannot be taught and that the art school must remain that special separate place.
For Ad Reinhardt, for example, the art school should be committed only to the "correction of the artist-as-artist, not the 'enlightenment of the public' or the popularization of art."26 Along with Hofmann and Reinhardt, Harold Rosenberg was hostile to the location of art schools in universities, claiming that American art of the 1960s, bred in those places, had replaced imaginative problem-solving (i.e., "hot," Abstract Expressionism) with dull systematic analysis and rational inference (i.e., "cool," Pop).27 It cannot simply be a coincidence that this dull art and many of its makers—anti-Vietnam War, feminist, civil rights activists, and so on—were also concerned specifically with the images and role of the mass media as part of a broad politics of representation.28

Being creative, finding imaginative solutions to problems is a facility all human beings share. Only in certain spheres of Western culture and society, however, have ideologies of creativity and radical individualism come to dominate and suffocate possible radical alternative modes of "thinking and doing." The art school, the home for fine art, is certainly one such sphere. Rather like the uractic modern artwork, proposed within modernist theory as an antithesis (vestigial in recent versions, certainly) to "the society of the spectacle," the art school has long been held to be a site of unalienated, creative labor uncontaminated by the degrading and alienated conditions and relations of production that have characterized most work in capitalist society. But the still powerful "minority culture" of mainstream modernism, whether in its Greenbergian, Frankfurt School, or more recent Baudrillardian formulations, radically curtails the definition and field of "creative" problems, issues, and actions. New technologies of production, when aligned with the intellectual resources required to undermine the premises of this "minority culture," may offer tentative elements of a future beyond cultural pessimism, "beyond the long and bitter impasse of a once liberating modernism."29 But nothing "in the technology" guarantees anything.

Notes
2. In Britain these "techno-utopian" attitudes have been associated particularly with, for example, Sadie Plant. See her essay "Beyond the Screen: Film, Cyberpunk, and Cyberfeminism," Variant 14 (1993): 16–21. See also Jenny Turner's interview with Plant, "Travels in Cyber-Reality," Weekend Guardian (London, March 18, 1995, 28. Plant's study of the Situationists (The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age [London: Routledge, 1992]), indicates, however, that such "techno-utopianism" exists in a reductive dialectic with a similarly unrealistic "techno-pessimism."
4. See Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London: Flamingo, 1981), 315–16. Social need may be expressed for a new technical capacity before the technology is available. Williams was fond of pointing out, for example, that August Strindberg had imagined a script for cinema before the invention of the cinematograph.
7. Ibid., 63.
13. See the English artist Terry Atkinson's interesting inter alia account of one such institution—Coventry School of Art (subsequently assimilated to the Lancaster Polytechnic, which then became Coventry University), in his Indexing: The World War I Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism (Belfast: Circa Publications, Cornerhouse, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992).
17. Williams, The Year 2000, 142–43.
19. Ibid., 8.
20. Ibid.
26. Quoted in Goldstein, Teaching Art, 293.
27. Ibid., 280.
28. For accounts of some of these artists, see, for example, Jonathan Harris, "Visual Cultures of Opposition," in Investigating Modern Art, ed. Liz Dwrey et al. (London: Yale University Press, 1996), and Francis Frascina, "The Politics of Representation," in Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties, ed. Frascina et al. (London: Yale University Press, 1993).
29. Williams, The Year 2000, 152.

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