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Media Study Futures

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The future of Media Study will be what it has always been: *made in the present*. When Gerry O’Grady founded the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1973, he specifically chose the singular form “study” over the plural “studies” to emphasize the notion of “a careful and extended consideration” of media and the sense of “zeal, or focus” that it conveyed (O’Grady 1-3). He also noted its relation to the derivate “studio,” understood originally as “the working place of a painter or sculptor and a place for the study of art,” and subsequently “a place where motion pictures were made” and later “a place maintained and equipped for the production and transmission of radio and television programs” (O’Grady) The implications of defining the field this way are worth noting.

First, Media Study was intended to refer to an intense and focused study of *media art* through a process that brought together practice and theory, making and interpretation. The State University of New York at Buffalo was among the first institutions to hire practicing artists as faculty members, and the faculty O’Grady brought together included some of the most experimental and innovative practitioners of the time, including Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Steina, Woody Vasulka and Tony Conrad. “There were no trained scholars in these fields,” O’Grady remarked, “and the only persons I could find to explain these new media were

the practitioners” (Sei 137). Experimental practice in making media was thus understood as the basis for its interpretation and theorization.

Second, citing the evolution of the studio—from a place for making painting and sculpture to one for making motion pictures, to the production and transmission of radio and television—acknowledges that the notion of media itself was in a state of constant evolution. O’Grady would refer to this quality as that of “the metamorphic image,” organizing an initial curriculum around three image-making technologies—film, video and the computer—and their changing materials, processes, and systems (Sei 137). These metamorphic images themselves were understood as constantly mutating into each other through experimental practices of the time. This instability of the image form and its contingency on methods of making position Media Study from the outset as a perpetually emerging field. To study media is to study emerging media.

Today, emerging media incorporates a wide range of materials, processes and systems. From bio-media made from living tissue to hyper-realistic media objects synthesized by generative adversarial networks (GANs) to media infrastructures enabled by embedded low-power wireless sensor networks, contemporary media art practice extends beyond the image-making codes and linguistic referents of its early practitioners. Computing itself has become a medium that touches all aspects of cultural production, distribution and consumption in one way or another. Media artists working critically and creatively with algorithms to process environmental data acquired through networked information systems, for example, simultaneously unpack and engender our present cultural moment through their interventions within it. In place of image-codes we find the encoded image, utterance, gesture, body, artifact, network, and so forth.

Within this context, the study of emerging media extends beyond the boundaries of the studio. Contemporary media art practices are distributed across networks, embedded within landscapes and proliferate throughout both urban and rural, natural and artificial environments. They are interdisciplinary not by choice but by necessity, and are often collaboratively produced. Some privilege active social and political engagement, others favor more remote representational techniques. Many seek out and define alternatives to dominant modes of production, distribution and consumption. To the extent that these practices tie themselves to their enabling technologies, they evolve rapidly, can quickly mutate, and may suddenly disappear without warning.

Some have suggested that this poses a crisis for traditional media theory and scholarship. “Because of the speed of events,” writes Geert Lovink, “there is a real danger that an online phenomenon will already have disappeared before a critical discourse reflecting on it has had the time to mature and establish itself as institutionally recognized knowledge” (12). Lovink goes on to suggest that theory needs to align itself with the temporality of events and practices it seeks to engage. We might go further and question in the first place the traditional separation between artist and theorist, maker and scholar.

Combining theory and practice has very little to do with “practicing theory” or “theorizing practice.” Making processes often involve tacit knowledge, coming to know something through practice, something that often eludes being stated in propositional or formal terms. This is not to say that it is not transferrable, but simply that it resists certain forms of codification. Gilbert Ryle has described this as “know-how” as opposed “know-that” (or “know-why”, “know-who”) (1945-46). Critical reflection and interpretation of this process and its products involves the aggregation of tacit knowledge and its articulation as explicit

knowledge, often performed collectively within communities of practice. Like two sides of a coin, these processes are inseparable and individually partial in nature. Through their mutual and reciprocal exchanges, new knowledge is created. It is in this sense that we can say that Media Study futures are presently shaped.

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