

LETTER TO A YOUNG ARTIST

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Dear . . . ,

why should you, a young artist, care about media? Or even enter a media programme in an art school, instead of a classical fine arts or design course? I am not trying to persuade you and make false promises. Let's be honest: Art always and by definition involves media. The medium of painting, in common understanding, is the canvas; some might argue that paint is a medium as well. When, according to the legend, the Greek painter Zeuxis painted grapes so well that birds tried to eat them, he explored and pushed the limits of what nowadays we would call his medium. The same was true for Renaissance painting – Michelangelo's direct application of paint onto the walls of the Sistine Chapel –, Friedrich's and Turner's overwhelming sea landscapes, twentieth century abstraction, Yves Klein's mesmerizing blue achieved through glueing unmixed pigments directly onto the canvas. All these artists were "media artists". And we are not even talking about sculpture, object and installation art, performance, video and computers, not about entire artistic movements like Futurism, Dada and Fluxus that had media experimentation at their core, not to mention that what is rather narrowly understood as electronic "media art" and "media design" today.

Media, in this most simple yet plausible understanding, is just another word for the materials artists use in their work. "Media art" and "media design" in most cases are just abbreviations for "new media art" and "new media design". And what could be more short-lived than "new media"? In the 1920s, radio was the new medium that sparked the utopian imagination of the Italian and Russian futurists, and of Bertolt Brecht. Its structure of sender, receiver and a "medium" – as literally the middle in between them – became the core of all media theories. In the 1960s, with Marshall McLuhan and Nam June Paik, television and video became synonymous with "new media". Even today, many if not most art school media programs are, above all, video programs. The Internet and net culture still are rather new in art practice and education, but a young person who grew up with the Internet most of her or his life, might wonder why we still call it a "new medium".

Are computers a "medium" at all? Perhaps no longer in the classical sense. A computer does not merely send data from A to B, but it is also a programmable processor, a machine built to transform rather than to transmit information. A chat bot in online forum, for example, is not just a purveyor, but also a sender and receiver of information.¹ Neither does "medium", in this case, fit the classic concept of an artistic material. And if you think of a chat bot as rather extreme or eccentric example, consider also databases, search engines or programming languages –

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¹Claudia Borges, a former student in our programme, recently programmed a chat bot for the V2 Institute of Unstable Media as a digital art work.

systems that act and perform in programmed, but nevertheless often rather strange ways. It makes more sense, perhaps, to call them rather than “material” or media in the conventional sense, digital, networked, programmed information systems.²

Yet these systems don’t come out of nowhere. Unlike a rock you pick up somewhere in order to forge it into a sculpture, the designs of those information systems are highly shaped by cultural, political and economical interests. Take, for example, the fact that you cannot copy music from your iPod to a friend’s portable music player, or that you may not be able to send files over your Internet connection as fast as you can receive them. To study in a media programme means that you should not just study how to design things with media, but how media themselves are designed, and what options you have of redesigning – or rethinking – them. A good art school media programme should give you this opportunity. This doesn’t mean that you should become rather a critic than a practitioner. Just consider that media theory itself took most of its inspiration from contemporary experimental art: McLuhan was heavily influenced by the late futurist “Vortex” painting and poetry of his friend Wyndham Lewis and by the experimental writing of James Joyce’s novel “Finnegans Wake”. Today, the best critical writing on digital culture takes its inspiration from contemporary net art and its aesthetic and conceptual “hacking” of the Internet.

What I would advise you and any young artist, whether or not you work under the “media” label: Don’t be afraid, and don’t have too much respect, of the apparent overkill of theory in contemporary art. Don’t end up as an artist who just depicts current academic fashions because it makes your works better readable for unoriginal thinkers. Make your art your own critical practice that stands on its own feet, and teaches critics to update their theories. Good art has always done this. Just for the same reason, all interesting art has been “media art”, and all great design “media design”. This is why I think that you, dear . . . , should care about media in your work, whether or not you decide to engage with them in dedicated study.

Your’s sincerely,

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²Which is how we define the “media” we work with in the Piet Zwart Media Design M.A. programme.