

The Reception and Rejection of Art and Technology: Exclusions and Revulsions

Chair's Introduction

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The call for proposals for this panel was intended to provoke and stimulate scholarship specifically on the historiography of art and technology. Instead, co-chair Charlie Gere and I identified a remarkable concentration of submissions that sought to understand why the art and technology movement of the 1960s had been marginalized in canonical art historical discourses. We decided to shift the thematic focus of the panel in order to capitalize on this serendipitous confluence of research activity. As a result, the papers, albeit from diverse perspectives, are mutually reinforcing and collectively offer a depth of inquiry on a relatively coherent topic, which might be entitled: "The Reception and Rejection of Art and Technology: Exclusions and Revulsions." They address issues pertaining to the problematic reception and marginalization of art and technology in the US and the former Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the absence of research on British cybernetician Gordon Pask, filling in important gaps in scholarship in the field.

The paucity of historiographical proposals made to the panel leads me to ask why that topic is not of particular interest to scholars. More research in this area undoubtedly would provide a valuable asset to current and future researchers as they evaluate and understand their intellectual heritage. In this spirit, the following comments briefly argue for the importance of historiographical and methodological research as part of an overall approach to defining the field and writing its history.

Indeed, leading art historians have contributed greatly to understanding the entwined histories of art, science, and technology (AST) during the Renaissance, Baroque, and Modern periods, and in photography,¹ though their work seems to have little impact on

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mainstream canonical discourses as measured by survey texts. With respect to contemporary art, however, much of the pioneering historical, critical, and theoretical English language literature on AST has been written by artists.² Despite the growing literature on the subject, Linda Dalrymple Henderson's "Writing Modern Art and Science" is, to my knowledge, the only historiographical study of the AST literature, perhaps because relatively little art historical attention has focused on the field in general.³

The development and use of science and technology by artists always has been, and always will be, an integral part of the art-making process. Nonetheless, the canon of western art history has not placed sufficient emphasis on the centrality of science and technology as co-conspirators, ideational sources, or artistic media. Bound up in this problem, there is no clearly defined method for analyzing the role of science and technology in the history of art. In the absence of an established methodology and comprehensive history that would help clarify the interrelatedness of AST and compel revision, its exclusion or marginality will persist. As a result, many of the artists, artworks, aesthetic theories, institutions, and events that might be established as the keystones and monuments of an AST history of art will remain relatively unknown to general audiences.

There is no comprehensive scientific/technological history of art, as there are feminist and Marxist histories of art, for example. This leads one to wonder what a history of art written through a lens that emphasizes AST would look like. What would be its

Banff New Media Institute, the Database of Virtual Art and Leonardo/ISAST.

¹ These include Jonathan Crary, James Elkins, Linda Henderson, Martin Kemp, and Barbara Stafford.

² Monographic literature by artists includes volumes by Roy Ascott, Jack Burnham, Critical Art Ensemble, Douglas Davis, Eduardo Kac, Margo Lovejoy, Peter Weibel, and Steve Wilson, to name just a few. Art historical monographs include volumes by Marga Bijvoet, Charlie Gere, Oliver Grau, Frank Popper, and Mitchell Whitelaw. Survey texts, including Christiane Paul's *Digital Art* and Rachel Greene's *Net Art*, together with anthologies, such as Ken Jordan and Randall Packer's *From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort's *New Media Reader*, and Judy Malloy's *Women, Art, and Technology*, as well as the web-based resource, *Media Art Net*, also have helped to historicize the field, though it must be noted that of these works, only the essays in the latter are written by art historians, including editor Dieter Daniels.

³ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Writing Modern Art and Science – I. An Overview; II. Cubism, Futurism, and Ether Physics in the Early Twentieth Century" *Science in Context* (2004), 17: 423-466.

monuments? How would they be related through historical narrative? What similarities and differences, continuities and discontinuities, might be mapped onto the use of technology for artistic purposes throughout the history of art? Why are there periods of fervent activity and others of apparent dormancy? In other words, how would the story go if standard survey texts, such as Janson's *History of Art* were re-written with an emphasis on the roles of science and technology on the history of art? In this regard, the sharp new two-volume set, *Art Since 1900*, written by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh ignores the history of art and technology to such an extent that Billy Klüver and E.A.T. are not even mentioned. Such exclusion from a text that clearly aspires to canonical status has significant, deleterious ramifications for the history of AST.

Curatorial practice historically has made important contributions historically, including the production of exhibitions and exhibition catalogs by Burnham, Pontus Hultén, and Jasia Reichardt, and, more recently, by many contemporary curators who have also made contributions to exhibition theory with respect to curating electronic media, establishing this specialized area as a bona-fide field of curatorial research.⁴ Festivals including SIGGRAPH, ISEA, and Ars Electronica, and major exhibitions at the ZKM also have provided important forums for discourses pertaining to AST, though typically focusing more on criticism and theory than on history. Similarly, until the early 1990s, the journal *Leonardo* primarily published writings by artists and scientists, in large part because critics and historians simply did not generate much material on the subject.

Much of the influential current literature is being produced in other disciplines, such as comparative literature, film history, performance studies, and cultural studies. Rather than argue for the primacy and originality of the innovative theoretical positions that characterize AST's history, as embodied in works of art and articulated in artists' theoretical writings, much recent criticism is peppered with citations of the usual

⁴ A partial list of contemporary curators and archivists includes: Isabelle Arvers, Annick Bureau, Andreas Broeckmann, Sarah Cook, Nina Czegledy, Steve Dietz, George Fifi, Rudolph Fieling, Darko Fritz, Jean Gagnon, Beryl Graham, Jens Hauser, Sabine Himmelsbach, Manray Hsu, John Ippolito, Tomoe Moriyama, Christiane Paul, Michelle Thursz, Benjamin Weil.

suspects: Baudrillard, Benjamin, Derrida, Deleuze, Latour, and Virilio. This is true of art historical literature on AST as well and I admit my own guilt in this regard. However, summoning such demi-gods to lend authority to an argument reifies existing structures of power and authority in academic writing – a result that conflicts with the aims the aforementioned gurus of post-structuralism. As Suzanne Stone Maretto, the psychopathic TV journalist in *To Die For* stated, “you’re nobody if you’re not on TV.” The same logic applies to academia: You’re nobody unless you’re footnoted. The historical monuments and critical and scholarly literature of AST will continue to be excluded from the canon of art history and intellectual history unless their theoretical contributions to critical discourses are highlighted. If art historians don’t do this, no one will. Moreover, such scholarship may be one of the most valuable contributions art history can make to the growing literature on science, technology, and culture being generated across humanistic disciplines.

One must ask: What is the voice of art history and criticism with respect to AST? What unique and valuable contributions have they made; and what contributions can they make now and in the future to historicize the subject - both in art history as well as in a broader cultural framework? Although I have more questions than answers, I hope that these provocations will spur debate and dialogue so that artists and art historians collectively can define the problems of this specialized field more clearly and begin to address them, if not in a systematic and concerted way, then at least in a way provides a grounds for identifying and problematizing methods and goals. The papers presented in this panel contribute to this project by making the invisible visible and by offering insight into the some of the reasons for AST’s canonical exclusion.