

Disruption Revisited**The Re-Appropriation of Experience**

Most ideas are not new. Their evolution comes from a hybridization and collective vision of ideas from the past, present, and future. Ideas are born from re-appropriating existing thoughts and concepts and attempting to disrupt or challenge notions of what came before. This approach relies on highlighting the commonalities of human experience and shifting their meaning from accepted forms of representation to experimental or deconstructed manifestations. In other words, by “disrupting” how we understand something, we are more likely to question its fundamental existence. Disruption itself can be defined as “interrupting or impeding the progress, movement or procedure” of something, or more simply to “break or rupture” a particular thought or action. This challenge to existing forms is usually less of a clear departure than a reaction and iteration of prevalent ideas. It is this point of disruption that allows for exploration and creativity to emerge.

Computer history has heralded the deconstruction, repurposing, or hacking of existing technology as an important element in its evolution. As Stephen Levy writes, “essential lessons can be learned about the world from taking things apart, seeing how they work, and using this knowledge to create new things.”² Despite the term “hacker” receiving negative or criminal connotations from the media, hacking has remained a cherished art form that transcends disciplines, skill levels, and individual glory. Media art practice has borrowed this ethic since it began with more recent cross-disciplinary works between artists and scientists, such as Billy Kluver’s Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) collective and John Cage’s numerous collaborations. Moving forward in time, Local Area Network (LAN) parties, blogger culture, social networking sites like Friendster, and the Flash Mob phenomenon demonstrate that technology has also become a human mediator that is rapidly shifting from fixed locations to mobile and wireless devices. This progression has personalized the experience of connectivity and allowed for social networks to form based on collective activity and proximity. The context of community has been uprooted from local to global and from private to public. This is a welcome disruption as it enables cross-pollination of ideas and a space for open discussion. Furthermore, technology has crept into art education and practice over the past 25 years, blurring the line between artist and technologists. This presents another disruption in the mean of artistic production, where acceptance of the artist-technologist hybrid is gaining momentum.

When the Ars Electronica Festival began in 1979, it was a disruptive statement in itself that challenged traditional arts events. By embracing hybrid media theory, new technology, and creative practice, Ars Electronica became a platform and community for artists working outside conventional mediums. The Ars Electronica Archive provides a rich source for understanding the importance and impact of technological practice as social phenomena. The collection never treats technology as a starting point, but rather as a step along a creative process that couples critical analysis with technical understanding.

My approach to the Ars Electronica archive is to highlight projects that critically challenge and deconstruct the fundamental assumptions of how technology is perceived from an experiential standpoint in popular culture. Some general examples might include projects or artists that reduce a system's functionality to reveal its true strengths, augment a traditional type of interaction to yield unexpected results, or create collaborative events that open communication channels amongst strangers. My interests lie in projects that encourage the disruption of technological aristocracy, where barriers for entry are reduced and playful renderings are valued above functionality.

These concepts are described in the Ars Electronica archive with Gene Youngblood's "Metadesign: towards a postmodernism of reconstruction," where he discusses how disruption is driven through re-appropriating contexts. He explains that "new telecommunication technologies can and will invert the structure and function of mass media

- from centralized output to decentralized input,
- from hierarchy to heterarchy,
- from mass audience to special audience,
- from communication to conversation,
- from commerce to community,
- from nation state to global village."³

These six starting points begin to question how the promise of technology as a social leveler becomes more evident with re-appropriation and disruption of existing contexts of interaction, place, and social engagement.

In most cases, technological advances often seem to overshadow human potential. This has caused a situation where people must "dumb down"⁴ to interact with machines. My view is that by disrupting the context and use of technology, we become more aware of our intentions before and during this interaction, and can thus attempt to challenge the interfaces we experience everyday. My aim is to focus on works that attempt to connect human experience to technology. Does a project succeed when its idea overshadows its construction? How do social, cultural, geographical, individual and global differences affect how we interact emotionally with each other and the technology we use? Can the digital artist be an important instigator in this debate? Today's media art cannot be justified with theory and art jargon if the interactive experience fails to be compelling. Audiences seem less inclined to spend time with digital works if their own personal frustration with computers encroaches on the artistic intention. My goal is to harness this aggravation and show how exposing the human side of technology is precisely how innovation occurs.



- 1 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (11th ed.), Merriam-Webster, Springfield, MA., 2004
- 2 Levy, Steven, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, Doubleday, New York 1984
- 3 Youngblood, Gene, "Metadesign: Towards a Postmodernism of Reconstruction," Catalog Ars Electronica, 1986
- 4 Lanier, Jaron, "Taking Stock", in: *Wired Magazine*, Issue 6.01, Jan. 1998