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ARTICLE

**NEW MEDIA, ART-SCIENCE AND CONTEMPORARY ART:
TOWARDS A HYBRID DISCOURSE?****The Post-Critical Hybrid****Ronald Jones**

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Abstract

We have arrived at a point where critical theory is being called upon to answer a basic question: what is the continuing relevance, value, and productive potential of criticality, or “oppositional knowledge”? I propose a departure from relativism, the ambiguities of postmodernism and fashionable pessimism for a new “post-critical perspective”. Post-criticality means engagement with proactive strategies triggering entrepreneurial, interdisciplinary, innovative, scalable and attainable solutions to collective challenges. In one sense you could say that while locking out nostalgia for an earlier and simpler time, post-criticality can mean retrofitting Modernism with what we have learned in the last century in order to begin engineering both methods and means for producing results across disciplines; not merely grandstanding jingoistic evangelism promoting a cause. From there the door opens onto inheriting the key parts of Modernism’s ambition for engagement, and setting agendas for action, without having to accept the ambiguity of postmodernism.

Keywords

post-critical, postmodernism, transdisciplinary, modernism, design, entrepreneurship, innovation

*El híbrido poscrítico***Resumen**

Hemos llegado a un punto en el que apelamos a la teoría crítica para responder una pregunta básica: ¿hasta qué punto sigue siendo hoy relevante, válida y potencialmente productiva la criticidad, o «conocimiento opositor»? Propongo que dejemos atrás el relativismo, las ambigüedades del posmodernismo y el pesimismo a la moda para adoptar una nueva perspectiva «poscrítica». La poscriticidad significa participar de estrategias proactivas que desencadenen soluciones de tipo emprendedor, interdisciplinarias, innovadoras, redimensionables y realiza-

bles para los retos de carácter colectivo. De algún modo, podría decirse que, aunque bloquea la nostalgia de una época anterior más simple, la poscriticidad puede suponer una retroadaptación del modernismo con todo lo aprendido en el último siglo para empezar a diseñar métodos y medios que produzcan resultados en las distintas disciplinas; no es un mero lucimiento de evangelismo jingoísta que impulsa una causa. A partir de aquí se abre una puerta a la posibilidad de heredar los aspectos esenciales de la ambición modernista por la participación y al establecimiento de programas de acción, sin tener que aceptar la ambigüedad del posmodernismo.

Palabras clave

poscrítico, posmodernismo, transdisciplinario, modernismo, diseño, espíritu emprendedor, innovación

The premise of this issue of *Artnodes*, nested in two sentences from guest-editor Edward Shanken's framing of the subject, read: "rarely does the mainstream art world converge with the new media art world. As a result their discourses have become increasingly divergent". The reasons for this cultural divergence, while explicit, are paradoxical, and will not, according to recent research, be easily overcome. Two essential reasons sustain this divergence, the increasing irrelevance of critical theory, and our consistent failure using interdisciplinary methods.

Years ago, Buckminster Fuller (1963) observed that "A designer is an emerging synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist and evolutionary strategist". Uttering these words, he was prophetic once again, this time signaling the creative potential of the interdisciplinary hybrid. Awestruck wonder describes the current obsession with interdisciplinary innovation; for companies and research universities it is the *topic de jour*, and yet the research on its effectiveness is just reaching us. In an article published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Lee Fleming's (2004) research shows that the most common outcome of interdisciplinarity is failure. Fleming looked at 17,000 patents of all sorts – from medicine to business to design – and his research suggests, and I quote: "that the [...] value of [...] innovations resulting from such cross-pollination is lower, on average, than the value of those that come out of more conventional siloed approaches". But, he continues, "my research also suggests that breakthroughs that do arise from such multi-disciplinary work, though extremely rare, are frequently of unusually high value – superior to the best innovations achieved by conventional approaches". In short, while there are many more success stories employing conventional monodisciplinary methods, we only see breakthrough innovations of the highest value produced by interdisciplinary teams. This is promising, if paradoxical news; we presently lack sufficient imagination to conceive of another methodology – other than interdisciplinary hybrids – capable of producing such a high level of creativity. But Fleming's and other studies tell us that to converge disciplines into an interdisciplinary hybrid – be that through a new discourse between new media and

mainstream art, or otherwise – we will have to perfect interdisciplinary methods from where they stand today.

I would like to frame the second reason allowing for the persistent gap between new media, art-science, and mainstream contemporary art as a question. We have arrived at a point where critical theory is being called upon to answer a basic question: what is the continuing relevance, value, and productive potential of criticality, or "oppositional knowledge"? This is hardly a new question. In George Orwell's 1940 essay on Charles Dickens, he framed the same question:

The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence the utter lack of any constructive suggestion anywhere in his work. He attacks the law, parliamentary government, the educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places. [...] His whole 'message' is one that at first glance looks like an enormous platitude: If men would behave decently the world would be decent.

What Orwell found lacking in Dickens – any actionable solutions to the misery he so accurately and artistically described – is what is lacking in oppositional knowledge today. If artists and designers want to participate in reshaping the political, social, economic and cultural agendas, they will have to begin to think beyond the exhausted forms of critical belligerence and mere consciousness-raising. I'm not sure how long we should continue to grant artists special dispensation just because what they are producing is merely "worthwhile".

By now, the ambiguity of post-modernism in general and relativism in particular has become a paradoxical hindrance. The sacking of relativism goes like this: The assertion that all truth is relative is itself either relative or not. If it is relative, then it can be ignored because its certainty exists only relative to someone else's point of view, which we are not obliged to share. If it is unconditional, and not relative, then it disproves the principle that all truth is relative. Either way relativism is undone.

Historically, the creative disciplines have been handed few occasions to make moral decisions, but one such example was the

conspicuous decisions of the architect Walter DeJaco to design, and largely oversee, the construction of the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz. According to relativism, inconsistent claims may have equivalent legitimacy. But to say “Dejaco’s designs for the gas chambers at Auschwitz killed innocent people held against their will” is not about attitudes or ways of thinking, it is a fact in the world analogous to that spoken truth. If you consider it a mindset, then it becomes a psychological profile of the narrator, rather than the physical circumstances of the murders Dejaco facilitated *by design*. We must depart from relativism, the ambiguities of postmodernism and fashionable pessimism for a new “post-critical perspective”. Broadly speaking, we must engage proactive strategies triggering creative, entrepreneurial, innovative, and attainable solutions to wicked problems. This then opens the door to creating hybrids through a discourse across disciplines, whether new media and art or otherwise. The good news? While exceedingly rare, as Fleming’s research shows us, examples of interdisciplinary post-critical hybrids exist.

In 1972 Hans Haacke exhibited *Rhinewater Purification Plant* in Krefeld, Germany. The project was a matter of direct engagement in gray-water reclamation and an early voice from the culture side responding to what we now understand as the ecological crisis. Even more importantly, Haacke’s project was a demonstration of exactly how to use ecological science to change governmental policy, and it is fair to say that his Krefeld project played a measurable role in resetting policy. He pumped the foul water released from the Krefeld Sewage Plant through an additional filtration system, making it clean enough for fish to thrive in, and thereby made it evident that the sewage plant was, itself, collapsing the Rhine river’s ecosystem. In effect, his project was not a critique but instead pragmatic and *post-critical* for having presented a scalable and achievable solution to a wicked problem. Haacke designed a “post-critical system” for water reclamation and not simply an artwork. He succeeded by merging the metrics for success from two disciplines – art and ecology – into a third, creating an instrumentalized hybrid. Is this a work of art or the pragmatics of gray-water reclamation? Answer: both.

Haacke created a co-dependency across disciplines with especially low alignment – art and public policy – which is exceedingly difficult to do. But without motivating new ecological policies *Rhinewater Purification Plant* (1972) is little more than an enthusiast’s science fair experiment, and without responding to Haacke’s project, public policy makers around environmental issues become irrelevant.

Tomás Saraceno, my second example of the post-critical, knits together disciplines with low alignment too, and then using them as his means, he creates methods promoting their reciprocal relations. As has been noted, “In Saraceno’s art, such collaborations [with physics, engineering, and even arachnology] result in visionary and

interdisciplinary spectacles but with hard science baked-in. He fuses customized technology with artistic innovation as evinced by *59 Steps to be on Air*, 2003, a solar-powered vehicle capable of lifting a passenger off the ground” (Jones, 2010). This is hard science – NASA, DARPA, and Lockheed Martin have long been devoted to developing solar powered flight – but Saraceno’s original research delivers a DIY model, and because it is scalable, promises to reduce the carbon footprint of air travel.

My third and final example of the post-critical comes from Freeman Dyson, the renowned physicist, and professor at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study. He envisions that in the near future artists and designers will use genomes to create new forms of plant and animal life that will proactively reverse the effects of global warming. In the *New York Review of Books*, Dyson (2009) writes:

If the dominant science in the new Age of Wonder is biology, then the dominant art form should be the design of genomes to create new varieties of animals and plants. This art form, using the new biotechnology creatively to enhance the ancient skills of plant and animal breeders, is still struggling to be born. It must struggle against cultural barriers as well as technical difficulties, against the myth of Frankenstein as well as the reality of genetic defects and deformities. If this dream comes true, and the new art form emerges triumphant, then a new generation of artists, writing genomes as fluently as Blake and Byron wrote verses, might create an abundance of new flowers and fruit and trees and birds to enrich the ecology of our planet.

An important distinction is to be made at this juncture. Dyson is hardly talking about so-called *Bio Art* of the stripe Eduardo Kac represents. His *GFP Bunny* (2000), a green fluorescent rabbit named Alba produced by transgenetic manipulation, stirred more theoretical moonshine than anything in recent memory. Chimerical adult mammals were first created in 1971 and so Kac’s rabbit is far from the kind of research Saraceno is up to. And this goes to the heart of the matter; Kac stirs tepid sociopolitical critique by breeding a pet and the art world, once again, is reduced to a mere debating club. What’s missing with Kac is precisely what’s shared between Haacke, Saraceno, and Dyson: *post-critical*, pragmatic, interdisciplinary, scalable, and achievable solutions to crisis. That is the face of the post-critical.

If artists and designers are to be post-critical, if they are to reset agendas, revise their doctrine, they will have to develop the methodologies that will allow them to affect spheres of influence beyond their own, as diverse and yet at the same time as interconnected as the environment and policy-making. We must restart our culture, as Joseph Kosuth wrote 42 years ago, by changing “the focus from the form of the language to what [was] being said”. To do this they will have to be proactive, moral, and courageous.

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CV

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After serving nine years as Senior Critic at the School of Art, Yale University, he was appointed Professor of Visual Arts in the School of the Arts, and Director of the Digital Media Lab at Columbia University in New York City. He then served as Provost at Art Center College of Design and became member of the Visiting Faculty at the National Institute of Design in India, and at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Städelschule Frankfurt, Germany.

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