

## The Inter- and Trans-disciplinary Condition of Art in Contemporary Culture

**Lucia Santaella**

Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brasil  
lbraga@pucsp.br

Art, or rather the field of art, is far from being what we used to think it was. After the display of 'isms' in modern art, interrupted by the disruption brought about by pop art, which in turn was followed by the avalanche of postmodern styles that impregnated all the arts – architecture, visual arts, cinema, dance, performance, and design – as of the 1980s, the paths of artistic production and creation have become increasingly multiple, diversified and heterogeneous. No limits or conceptions have been established *a priori* that could limit the choices of artists in terms of materials and media, props, techniques and technologies, places and situations, genres and methods, and proposals and perspectives. After *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, artists have become masters of their choices.

If, from the artist's perspective, what is heteroclitic prevails, what about the complex context of art's exhibition and circulation? As I have previously discussed (Santaella, 2016), in order to comprehend this entangled field one must consider that, in addition to including the intricate diversity and heterogeneity of what has been created, produced and circulated as art, it also includes an immense plethora of mega- or micro-organizations, multiple institutions, associations, affiliations, intermediations, communications, and broadcasts that bring the works of individual artists or of groups of artists to the point of reception by the public. Once again, I quote Rancière (2012, p. 27), when he draws attention to "the logical and paradoxical interweaving between the operations of art, the modes of circulation of imagery and the critical discourse that refers to the hidden truth of the operations of one and the forms of the other. It is this intertwining of art and non-art, of art, commodities and discourse" that undoubtedly becomes entangled in what makes up the so-called contemporary art.

Inspired by Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "new cultural intermediaries," as extended by Featherstone (1995), in 2007 I discussed the increasing number, from the 1970s to date, of professionals who play intermediary roles between the art produced by the artists, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the exhibition, dissemination, transmission and circulation of this artistic production to the various public strata. These include professions that are called immaterial or cognitive labor (Lazzarato and Negri, 2001), a type of work that involves a playful and creative capacity, which has been attracting more and more professionals in line with the exponential growth of networks.

In 1992, in her small volume devoted to contemporary art, Cauquelin (2005) also refers to this phenomenon using the expression "production assistants," and finds examples in press officers, agencies, culture journalists, art critics associated to galleries and museums, exhibition organizers, and importers/exporters of information, etc. As the consumer society – from which art is not detached – becomes denser, "the number of intermediaries increases *pari passu* with the formation of a circle of professionals, true managers. The figures of the great merchant, the great collector, emerge," all based on the power of the media and the market which, far from what some think, is not limited to the purchase and sale of artistic objects, but involves public and private financing for mega exhibitions, festivals, courses, publications and a number of activities. These refer to trends that unfold and accelerate with the global expansion of the mobile and ubiquitous digital networks of communication, information and entertainment. In addition, courses are developed in universities with a view to facing the new and unforeseen technological challenges that are rooted in culture and which the arts absorb and transmute.

Quoting Dickie (2008), Venturelli (as yet unpublished) also draws attention to the fact that the art world is "built and shared in a network of institutions such as schools, museums, galleries, commercial market systems, and professions, all of which participate in constructing a globalized, international system of networks for art."

Therefore, there are authors who point out to us that the system and circuits of the arts are no longer what they used to be a few decades ago. The tangle became much more densely complex. Thus, before demonizing what many may refer to as the cacophony of arts, one must consider the circumstances of its historicity, and the heterogeneous roles of its insertion in the contradictory, paradoxical, and

conflicting socio-cultural environments of our time.

### **Return to Walter Benjamin**

In an attempt to find some understanding amidst the whirlwind of artistic production and circulation in contemporary times, I have sought foundations in Benjamin's concept of the artist as a producer (Benjamin, 1985), a notion that may only be understood if we take into account, again with Benjamin, the inalienable historicity of art.

According to Benjamin, the study of arts cannot draw attention away from the material bases of the historicity of artistic forms, of the social relations in the art sphere, and of its reception processes, revealing that the historicity of objective reality also imposes a historicity of the artistic production methods. The artistic production methods available to a society not only determine the social relations between producers and consumers, but also substantially interfere with the very nature of the work.

More than that, instead of considering the production generated by methods that were emerging from the perspective of old production modes, Benjamin analyzed the traditional artistic methods based on the most current production practices. This game between the present and the past highlights them both, drawing our attention to the fact that the past does not merely serve as a historical document; rather, the past remains alive in the determinations and implications that it still reflects in the present.

Moreover, when Benjamin (1975) wondered – in his anthological study of art in the age of technical reproducibility – to what extent the invention of photography had changed our understanding of art, I think that question should be repeated with each new media invention. For example, to what degree is the advent of art in new media (i.e. art in digital media and all its substitutes, currently in advanced stages of 4D imaging, 3D printers, Kinect cameras, etc.) bringing deep changes, by expanding the borders of art and greatly increasing the complexity of the art system? This is precisely what has led me to postulate that we live in a time of effervescent pluralism in the arts and culture, a pluralism resulting from the simultaneity, the coexistence of all the materials, techniques, genres, species and methodologies of artistic production from the past and from the present, which

coexist, blend, separate, supplement each other, oppose each other, attract each other and interchange in such a way as to make contemporaneity a time of many times and which, since 2007, I have referred to as the pluralist ecology of culture, of communication and of the arts to signify the undeniable current tendency to overlap temporal and spatial layers and paradigms that synchronize. Accordingly, art today is entangled in a network of dynamic forces, both pre-technological and technological, artisan and virtual, local and global, massive and post-massive, corporeal and informational, material and immaterial, in-person and digital etc.

In this context, it is Benjamin's thought that art is always rooted in the culture of its time that authorizes me to propose, as I have done on another occasion (Santaela, 2010), that the arch-complexity of contemporary art is rooted in the no less than arch-complex contemporary culture that seems to result from the indissoluble synchronicity and interconnection of six cultural eras – oral culture, written culture, Gutenberg's era, mass culture, media culture and cyber culture – that mingle, approach, overlap, and move away in movements that may be compared to dynamic movements similar to those of sea drifts.

### **Six Cultural Eras in Hybridization**

Since 2003, when I conceived the idea of today's overlaps and mixtures of six cultural eras, reality has responded positively to this idea insofar as it seems to help discern the current state of affairs. This is why I have often embraced this proposed concept, the basis of which lies in the fact that, although one cannot deny that we live in a cyber-centric culture, this does not mean that other pre-cybernetic cultural logics have ceased to exist. Thus, it seems to me that the distinction between the communication logics that operate in each of the six types of cultural formation is essential to understand the hyper-hybridization of today's culture and, within it, to allow us to understand not only the complex dynamics of the art circuits but also the role played by the methods of production, distribution, circulation and reception of the arts in these circuits. Let me explain further.

Oral culture requires no explanation, as long as we do not forget its richness by including singing, dancing, rituals, and theater. Written culture implies, above all, pictographic, ideographic or alphabetic coding systems and, naturally, supporting materials to record these inscriptions, such as stone, leather, papyrus. Printed culture, which is considered the paper- and book-supported culture, was broadly

studied by McLuhan (1972) in *Gutenberg's Galaxy*. Alongside Gutenberg's invention, the perspective system for visual representation was also codified, while polyphony was laying the groundwork for coding the tonal system in western music. The mass culture – inaugurated by the printed press and supported by the telegraph and photography – expanded to the cinema as the first art for the masses, and found its apogee in radio and television.

I use the expressions "media culture" and "cyber culture" with as precise and differentiated meanings as possible. Turning to media culture avoids the mistaken idea, unfortunately professed by many, that we have passed directly from mass culture to cyber culture. Cultural changes do not travel by abrupt leaps. Threads that are not always visible exist and are often extremely subtle, building bridges that underlie the obvious surface of the facts. Again, I found in Benjamin (1975) the inspiration for this realization, as he draws attention to the fact that cubism – with its multidirectional fragmented structure, whose cohesion can only be completed by perception – has prepared human perceptual sensitivity for the advent of cinema, a language full of ellipses and of a freedom that connects times and spaces.

Moreover, the early 1980s introduced equipment and devices that, in line with the sweeping presence of mass media, gave rise to a culture of availability and transience: photocopiers, videocassette recorders and video recording devices, Walkman stereos and walkie-talkies (which nostalgically remind us of Win Wenders' Paris, Texas), together with a remarkable video clip industry and especially the newborn and promising video game industry, along with the extensive production of video films for rental at video stores, and all this followed by cable TV. The main characteristic of these devices and the languages that permeate them is that they require an individual choice and consumption, as opposed to mass consumption. This leads to media culture. Because they depend on the choice of more personalized information and entertainment, they have prepared the receiver's perceptive and cognitive sensitivity for the communicative processes of digital culture, a culture of access that allows access when the user actually seeks it. Therefore, media culture has bridged mass culture and today's digital culture, whose transformations have been overwhelming.

One cannot help but notice that digital culture, thanks to the computer that functions as metamedia, has embracing tentacles that can capture and translate many

of the features of the techniques and technologies that were typical of the preceding cultural formations. This was the fate of typewriters, fax machines, analog cameras and, for example, the typical devices of the media culture that were taken in by the computer culture, and by the multifunctionality of cell phones. No one listens to music on a Walkman anymore; video rental stores were inexorably replaced by Netflix; non-mass communication and entertainment features, which once depended on a number of available media devices, are now condensed into computers and, more and more, into cell phones. This integration, however, should not lead us to ignore the important role played by media culture, even if the presence of its typical media, from now on, can no longer be clearly distinguishable, which does not mean, however, that the type of communicational logic it introduced must be disregarded.

Digital culture, in turn, is essentially linked to ongoing globalization, and to the cultural, social and political changes it induces. It relies on mental frameworks, modes of social appropriation, and statistical practices that greatly differ from those we have known so far. Abstract navigation through information and knowledge landscapes accessed with a few clicks, the creation of virtual work groups on a world scale, and the various forms of interaction that were enabled by network relationships, blogs and instant messaging platforms – all this enhanced by hybrid mobile communication circuits – create a huge amount of innovative behaviors whose social, political, and cultural consequences have repeatedly baffled cultural theorists and critics. In fact, it is a bafflement that is accentuated by the concerning and disturbing evolution of the digital universe.

Social networks, which have attracted so much attention from cultural critics, are now but surface ripples from under which significant technological, social and behavioral mutations have started to emerge. We are in the midst of the age of terabytes and their processing in big data algorithms, the age of the Internet of things, of smart cities and environments, of augmented reality, of wearable, portable and implantable technologies, of smartphone-embedded devices and sensors, of evolutionary robotics. Finally, the changes that human beings, their institutions and organizations are and will be going through no longer allow any room or time for nostalgia. Inseparable from this technological framework, culture reaches arch-complex levels. Essentially heteroclitic, hybrid, decentralized, reticulated,

based on autonomous modules, it materializes in the enormous information clouds that surround us and to which we have access at the touch of the fingers. Structured in increasingly powerful algorithms, these clouds convey signs made of lights and bytes, signs that are evanescent, volatile, and liquid, but recoverable at any time.

In this context, as far as I can see, the impression of chaos and cacophony generated by the contemporary hyper-dense culture arises from the lack of a necessary distinction between the specific characters of each of the six types of cultural formations and logics and the complex effects produced by their mixture. Each cultural formation has a different social behavior from another cultural formation for the mere fact that each of them uses its own different method to produce, store, distribute, communicate and receive information. More importantly, each cultural formation was able to create systems of signs, types of language organizations, representations of reality and, above all, their own artistic forms.

These are the reasons why I argue that the essential factor in understanding the inter- and trans-disciplinary nature of contemporary arts lies in the immense network of mixtures and hybridizations that characterize them insofar as they are rooted in culture. While each type of cultural formation has specific traits that differentiate one cultural formation from another, when a new cultural formation emerges, it does not entirely absorb the then existing formation. Written culture did not make oral culture disappear; media culture did not make mass culture disappear; and so on. Likewise, videos did not make paintings disappear; interactive digital arts did not eliminate installations, but rather enhanced them in video-installations and cyber-installations. This is how all cultural formations and the art forms that have emerged therefrom – from oral culture to digital culture – now co-exist, live together, translate and synchronize each other to form a hyper-complex and hybrid cultural and artistic blend. What characterizes our time, therefore, are its encounters and fusions with many other times, in intricate temporal and spatial crossings that empower the pluralism of the arts and vice versa.

### **Art as a Seismograph**

If art is rooted in culture and, at the same time, it signals and illuminates, like a lighthouse, what remains alive in the direction of the future, the pluralist ecology of the arts is most probably signaling, like a seismograph, the persistence and even the expansion of a pluralistic ecology of culture, a pluralism that is always more

open, more heterogeneous and richer than any comforting monolithic prognostics. What the unlimited variability of the field of art today and its inter- and trans-disciplinary nature seem to signal is the inadequacy of preconceived judgments about what art is or is not, what it should be and what it should not be. In the face of the pluralistic richness within which art is expressed today, one must avoid being pretentious enough as to hold a magic key that would open the doors to a so-called “true art”, also avoiding personal preferences for artists and works from speaking louder than the arts’ invitation to the opening of the floodgates to seeing and thinking, to the oxygenation of the pores of human sensitiveness to perceptive and intellectual regeneration, which has always been, is, and will probably continue to be, the greatest among the great tasks of art.

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