If These Walls Could Talk: 
The Space Around The Art

Introduction

Three of the works in The Innovationists exhibition are actually not present in MOCA at all, a statement that sounds strange if one holds to older definitions of art. Cogoo’s “Turntable Bicycles” are a performance brought in from the streets, Eric Sui’s “Touchy” is meant as a social intervention in public space, and my two “Sustainable Cinema” sculptures are scale models of large public artworks meant to be installed outdoors and interacting with nature. The other works in the show embrace technology, movement, electronics, and lighting and would seem to be out of context in a 1921 historical building. Media Art often struggles with the walls that hold it and this ties to one of its defining qualities: more than other art forms, it draws its focus to the space around the art.

The Art of the Relationship

In the most basic definition, media is ‘the thing between.’ If I talk directly to a friend, there is no media; but if my words pass through a piece of paper, a handphone or a computer, then there is media. The positive side is that media can be a bridge between people, making it possible to communicate and share while not being present. The negative side, however, is that it still is something that separates us, a type of wall. Media is often criticized because so much is lost when the message between the sender and the receiver must pass through something. Media Art gains much of its power from that very friction—it brings us together and it keeps us apart at the same time.

In many ways, Media Artists are more interested in the relationship between artist and viewer than in a message or physical form. We are the artists who emphasize connections, disconnections and pathways and our content comes from the interaction. Because our lives are now filled with machines that help us communicate, much Media Art seems to use new technologies. However, it is a product of several art movements over the last 100 years that gradually left the object-on-a-pedestal behind and embraced art that could be an action, an experience, a system or a relationship.

Because of this, many museums struggle with curating Media Art and MOCA should be credited for its fine presentation. Media Art is difficult to value as its quality is not decided by aesthetics, craftsmanship or materials but by the quality of the relationship. I often judge my own sculptures in the same terms of a good or bad girlfriend—did we understand each other, did we make each other laugh, did we communicate well, did we make each other better? It may seem odd to equate a steel windmill sculpture with a lover, but in Media Art the criteria are quite similar.
Inside and Outside

The show at MOCA has reminded twice now of this magical quality. When I was first invited into the exhibition, I wondered if a historic Japanese school was the right venue for the noisy, messy, playful works that curator Joel Kwong had chosen. When I arrived, I stood in front of the building and marveled over the accurate symmetry of the architecture. In contemporary art, balance is usually avoided. But inside, the show seemed perfectly at home in the historical setting. Joel wrote, “my curatorial angle is somehow not only selecting works to fit in the space, but also in through the artworks, to transform the space.” Her mix of performance, devices, video, sound and kinetic sculptures changed the building. The artworks both move and move around, sometimes even outside MOCA itself. In addition, the dramatic play of light and darkness between the works makes the viewer both aware of the building and forgetful of it at the same time. Indeed, the space is transformed.

My second reminder came from a late night walk around Central Taipei. The city has a renowned collection of public artworks and sculptures that have been installed in the parks, malls and streets, many commissioned by MOCA. I thought that viewing them at 4am, without the buzz of midday Taipei, would allow me to study them more closely, to have a ‘private moment’ with these amazing works. I thought that they would be stronger without the noise and confusion of Central distracting me. Instead, they felt like they were sleeping, waiting to be ‘woken’ by the city itself. The public works need the public. Both indoors and outdoors, Taipei has reminded me that the relationship power of art is not just between artist and viewer, but also between the artwork and the space around it.

The Space around the Art

The public artworks scattered around Taipei are very different from the monuments our grandfathers put in public parks. They are not memorials or markers. For centuries, public art in the forms of statues, fountains and gardens was designed to be looked at like we look at a painting. Even the Encyclopedia Britannica once defined that “a garden or park design contains a series of pictorial compositions.” Media art is not a proscenium art where we step back from a work to look and contemplate; it is meant to be experienced.

While most of these sculptures are not considered Media Art, the space around them somehow became ‘mediated.’ Like shade from trees, the area around each of these works became a place for relationships. Returning again on a sunny Taipei afternoon, that communication was dynamic to watch. They were places to stop and check messages, eat a snack, meet a friend, take a photo, steal a kiss, play with children. The artwork becomes part of the public, part of the interactions that make a city. In the 1960’s, American sculptor Robert Smithson began placing his work in the wilderness to find if it would change its meaning. He wrote, “I began to see the world in a
more relational way. In other words, I had to question where the works were, what they were about…so it became a preoccupation with space.”

**A Place to have an Experience**

I once secretly watched a couple take their wedding photos near one of my sculptures and I still consider that one of my greatest honors. Those photos with my crazy machine in the background will be part of that family’s history for centuries. During the performances at MOCA, thousands of photos were taken, some even by one of the artworks. Because these works are relationships meant to be experienced, they become connected to us differently than looking at a painting or watching a movie. We remember the artworks in their context, “that night when we watched that bicycle performance in the courtyard.” It becomes Media Art.

Much has been written that our screen technologies now keep us from having actual experiences. We watch more than we do. The stream of video, music and images has replaced our contact with the real. Media Art uses those same tools to regain that contact—“Touchy” comes alive only when the wearer is touched. Like the public sculptures in Taipei, these artworks become markers to personal moments that become part of a larger history and an evolving culture. Traditional art forms had intrinsic value, their worth was as an individual piece of creative expression. Media Art has instrumental value, its worth comes from the dynamic changes it causes around it.

**There is Only One Taipei**

Art creates a context for relationships. Public works have unique relationships with the urban space around them and therefore add uniqueness to our cities. As mega-corporations replace our local coffeehouses, restaurants and markets they also steal the context—we see the same signs in every large city now. We live in a world that is branded and recognizing logos and signs is a type of currency. Art is the shock of the unordinary, so jarring that it creates a new context. Uniqueness becomes more valuable each day in the definition of our cities. Art reminds us of our ownership of our cities, that we decide what our cities look like.

Writing in the 1930’s, philosopher Walter Benjamin was concerned that the age of the machine and reproduction was causing the loss of something he called ‘the aura’. He believed that the presence of an artwork in time, in place gave it a type of authority that a copy can never achieve. For him, a painting had an aura but a photograph did not. He longed for art that had a unique existence and unique place. I wonder if today we have replaced one-of-a-kind objects with one-of-a-kind experiences. The ‘aura’ has left the artwork but now hovers in the space around it.

**Taking it to the Streets**

Many media artists are exploring new locative and mobile technologies. These artworks are the electronic versions of creating new urban contexts by
mediating space. As our technologies become lighter and smaller, our cities will become dense with invisible data. Soon screens built into our eyeglasses will show us additional data about the places we walk through. Space will electronically give us more detail, broadcast to us, steer us.

The word for this is ‘sentient space’. Space that has a mind of its own, that is aware of us and itself. Smart spaces and augmented reality will add a new layer of media. Whether this new blanket of data will be used as megacorporation billboards or for individual expression will be decided by us. The next battle in how our cities look will be over context and it will be fought with media.

**Conclusion**

Media art is the art of what is in-between, the art of the relationship between the artist and his public but also of the context around it. In “Little Gidding,” T.S. Eliot wrote, “We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring. Will be to arrive where we started. And know the place for the first time.” The more we travel, both physically and virtually through our screens, the more we learn about our home because we learn the context of the place. We see our home’s relationship with ourselves, our families, governments, history and culture. Media Art creates a heightened experience of place and by doing that, it brings forward the relationships we have with each other and the relationships we have with the worlds we live in.

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