

**Theory and the Eclectic:  
Blurring the Lines Between Discourse and Performance  
Patrick Lichty**

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the electronic art/cultural milieu is experiencing a profusion of different modes of new media expression through HTML, VRML, Flash, E-mail, and hybrid forms of communications. However, it seems that new media 'Theory', per se, has located itself in relatively narrow modes of communication (text, and some Web installations) and ideological frameworks (such as French Poststructuralism). What I propose is that new media art theory and criticism should expand in their practices of production and (re)presentation to reflect the diversity of practices and ideologies employed in technological spaces.

My line of reasoning comes from a recent series of comments in TDR by Richard Schechner [1] regarding his thoughts on performance studies as well as Baudrillard's writings on cultural transparency [2]. In his commentary, Schechner wrote that performance studies have become too detached from mainstream theatre and its practices, and as such, should strive to reincorporate performative practices and studies of theatre. However, I interpret this as his lament that theory and practice have become too estranged, and that the two genres should have deeper involvement with one another. In the case of new media, the separation is often paradoxical, which leads us to Baudrillard.

Following from Baudrillard's theory of cultural transparency, the rift between different modes of expression is highly problematic. In a highly media-laden environment, such as the milieu of electronic communications (which includes the technological arts), cultural forms reach a level of transparency with one another in which their borders become indistinct, if not indistinguishable. Sport, as only one example, now incorporates elements of aesthetics, politics, entertainment, war, and commerce, and vice versa, to one extent or another. It would be safe to say that in many, but not all cases, that theory is as inextricably linked to the production of art as praxis with theoretical discourse. This opens the door to previously hybrid experiential forms of theory as art, as well as art and performance as theory. Keep in mind that the inversion mentioned shows only two possible dimensions of discursive strategy, but such were used as an illustration of the many possible combinations of various forms of praxis under our proposed methodology.

The discursive arc that we have been following has implied that the principles discussed apply only to the production of works filling the continuum encompassing theory and practice, but the converse can also be said about the presentation, or a 're-presentation' of such eclectic works, mediated, textual, or otherwise. According to Baudrillard and Schechner, could performances or installations of theoretical content be placed within an experiential framework, as installations or performances, to reflect the diverse range of media and experiences in the cultural milieu? To do so would problematize the borders between genres in production, presentation, and mediation. But, as Baudrillard asserts, those boundaries are already in question.

By questioning the borders between genres, the opportunity arises for the practitioner to conflate the concepts that are being discussed in any body of work. Although this discussion posits that the delineation between theory, practice, and representation, are far from distinct, the work will appear nonsequitur if the intent and cultural context provide a poor frame of reference, and thus will not engage with the public. Although the borders between theory and practice have been blurred at best, the rethought modes of same must still be grounded not only in extant texts, both media and print, but in experience as well.

A rethinking of methodologies (theoretical, practical, etc.) also includes the potential for resituation of ideology. At the end of the second millennium of Western civilization, the prevailing theoretical ideology in art and performance centers around French Poststructuralism, creating a paradox. As an ideology, Postmodernism suggests discursive heterogeneity through the breaking down of master narratives, yet has become its own canon. In many ways, it is even considered a priori. Through its own principles of de-privileging master narratives, we must

realize that postmodernism is only one such set of ideas. Therefore, our resituation of theory and practice within an experiential framework of the larger cultural context suggests that works can embody any ideology within a given frame of reference. In order to do so, there must also be an awareness of the ideology in play (postmodernism, transmodernism [3], Humanism, Neo-Platonism, etc.) to compellingly deliver one's message in a given setting. But how is that message delivered?

In order to examine some of the numerous ways the spectrum of practices that utilize theoretical and experiential strategies, we will examine two 'events' in which different configurations of those approaches creates its own critique. In the author's work, "*Grasping at Bits*"[4], an online essay on intellectual control and art on the Internet is broken apart from the linear textual model into modular paragraph-statements, and grouped by topical association to one another through the use of a dynamically-linked mindmap interface [5]. This interface allows the 'reader' to navigate through the discursive space of the essay in a spatial fashion, leaving it up to the individuals to create their own narrative structures. In addition, the paragraph-statements are linked via four redundant interface structures, as well as pop-up annotations and color coding to denote affinity to certain conceptual themes. *Grasping at Bits* is not only a nonlinear critical essay, but also incorporates elements of interactivity, design, information architecture, and aesthetics to create an installation that alludes to more lyrical and structural forms than the traditional essay form. In this way, *Grasping at Bits* plays upon the discontinuities that hypertextual narratives present by virtue of their nonlinearity, as well as the mixing of media forms for create performative theoretical spaces through which the reader can explore and experience.

As *Grasping at Bits* is an essay that is self-aware of the varied nature of the media environment it represents, the practitioner can incorporate other experiential tactics to (re)present a theory of the eclectic, including multimedia, performance, and personal engagement with the audience. The rather rarefied intellectual frame of reference that contemporary, and not just electronic, art practice occupies often creates a perception of a disengagement with its public. Such a disconnection could be hardly further from the truth, as principles found in current cultural theories are frequently drawn from the everyday events from within the surrounding social environment.. The difficulty in engagement seems to be in presenting the work using methodologies that engage with the public in cogent, yet clear and accessible ways. For example, at the Living Architectures summit at the Banff New Media Institute [6], I witnessed a presentation on interactive media in public spaces that was 'performed' as a tabloid-style science-fiction story. The story was a humorous one about aliens who 'illegally' take over Internet II bandwidth that the Canadian taxpayers paid good money not to use in the first place. The presentation, although unorthodox by academic standards, put forth its concepts concisely, and as you may notice, held a place in my memory. Engagement with the audience in critical discourse and artistic expression has been, and is, a crucial point in communicating our ideas and experiences, and it seems that conciseness and humor, along with referring to common cultural referents created a strong rapport with the audience. However, this is only one methodology, and I do not suggest that all theorists should consider being stand-up comedians (although they are frequently most amusing), but this illustrates that alternate modes of presentation and style can yield compelling results. I feel that I could probably learn much from those methods when communicating with my audience.

I have sought to consider the manifold ways that discourse can be reembodyed in new media and online spaces, but what of the traces left by digital culture as they become part of the archive? The records left by countless performances, mixed media events, and now electronic performance/installation severely problematizes the keeping of such accounts. The difficulties here are numerous, from operating system incompatibility, system obsolescence, to the neglect of updating the library for new software, among others. When looking for the most enduring record, we are usually left with the book, although some argue that the life of the book is just as limited if the proper materials are not used, such as acid-free paper. A key irony here is that the Long Now Foundation [7], an organization based on considering humanity's role in the long-term future of the planet, is largely funded by the high tech sector. So, as we consider the work's

contextual frame and mode of expression in the larger cultural environment, the archive is only one more aspect to consider in the embodiment of the work.

Therefore, in creating a theoretical approach that is more representative of contemporary practices and milieus, there is greater latitude for other media, forms of communication, and engagement with the public. There is also the burden of the necessity of being aware of the ideological and cultural context of the work. Such challenges are daunting, but beg taking into account as the spirit of experimentation evident in new media art demands an expansion of discursive strategies. These can incorporate experiential information, alternate modes of expression in media and style, and take into account the transparency of aspects of culture with one another. In so doing, perhaps new theoretical approaches may arise which are cogent, yet engaging.

[1] Schechner, Richard. *Post-Post Structuralism?* pp 4-6, TDR T166 V44.2 Summer 2000, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA

[2] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Transparency of Evil* pp 45-50. 1994, Verso, New York, NY, USA

[3] Novak, Marcos. *From the Invencao (Sao Paulo, 1999) and Living Architectures (Banff, 2000) conferences*. Novak posits that additional layers of society are developing in addition to those previously theorized, creating a 'trans' modernity, the prefix trans- suggesting a parallel existence of several modes of existence at once.

[4] Lichty, Patrick. *Grasping at Bits*, Interactive Hyperessay, <http://www.voyd.com/gab>, 2000

[5] See screen capture in this article for reference.

[6] Macleod, Douglas, *Aliens Invade Toronto* Banff, New Media Institute (performance) 9/22/2000 Banff, Alberta, Canada

[7] Long Now Foundation, <http://www.longnow.org/>