Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline arose in the middle of the 18th century, when art came to be defined as an autonomous field of rules, social practices, and institutions (like museums). For that historical reason, aesthetics is not just “art theory,” as it articulates both more general and more particular issues, for instance: perception through the senses, the definition of beauty, judgment of taste, the truth content of an artwork and its relationship to (physical, psychological, economic etc.) reality, the questions of originality and newness; eventually, the definition and the very possibility of “art” itself, which becomes a serious matter in the course of the 20th century. Such different perspectives involve changing considerations about the very role of aesthetics itself, until its apparent diffraction in many art theories. Here, I will consider aesthetics as a reflexive activity more than a closed “discipline,” and I will follow the particular path of its encounter with the contemporary questioning of the “media.” Media aesthetics is the activity of thinking about our experience of contemporary art, questioning the borders between the notion of “medium” (a means for expression) and “media” (a means for communication), and between art techniques and cultural means.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, a German philosopher in the age of Enlightenment, was the first to use the Latin word *Æsthetica* to indicate a new philosophical discipline to which he dedicated a fundamental, yet unfinished, work (1735 and 1750). He considered aesthetics a sort of “sister” of traditional (originally Aristotelian) logic that, to him, was unable to approach knowledge through the senses. He gave a complex, three-fold definition of aesthetics: generally speaking, “the science of knowledge through sensations” (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*); in a more specific way, “the theory of arts” (*theoria liberalium*...
artium); and, finally, “the capacity to think beautifully” (ars pulchre cogitandi). Perception, the arts, and beauty were to Baumgarten the main concerns for aesthetic studies, while afterwards – apart from Kant – sensations were to be less considered: in the 19th century, aesthetics became to be considered as philosophy of art, that is, a branch of philosophy considering art as its content of thought and beauty as its capital issue. While Kant’s aesthetics followed Baumgarten’s primacy of sensation, Schlegel and Schiller would prefer to speak of Kunstlehre (“art doctrine”), rather than of “aesthetics”; also Hegel, the foremost author of modern aesthetics, would try to displace the idea of aesthetics and to give it a more speculative dimension. But Hegel would also admit that the word aesthetics “indicates the science of sensations” (1975).

Aesthetics contains sensation in its very etymology, going back to the ancient Greek aisthánesthai, “to perceive.” Reinventing the classic cataloging of arts according to the senses – in particular sight vs. hearing – Baumgarten built up a bridge linking philosophical thought to the senses, trying to find an answer to the traditional philosophical dualism between thought (rationalism) and sensation (empiricism). Here, I will understand aesthetics as a theoretical inquiry into sensations and thoughts that arise within art experience, be they linked to art forms and contents, or to a larger context: anthropologic, psychological, socio-economic, and so on. Coming back to aisthesis’s perceptive dimension, aesthetic thought responds to strong emotional stimuli, trying to rationalize them and to make generalizations about their issues.

At the core of our reflection upon media aesthetics I will place the study of the dialectical links between art theories and human perception, intended as a historical, changing whole. This way, aesthetics becomes a tool to understand dialectically the connection between the particular and the general, between the individual and the society, between the art field and the world; in a similar way, the aesthetic discourse, when applied to media, starts from considering the very relation between singular artistic “mediums” and social media as a whole. “Media aesthetics” as such, as an unmediated link, conveys the ideological drive to abolish any difference between mediums (old, as well as new ones); on the other side, media aesthetics still remains a particular application of aesthetical thought to mediums and to media, not the only horizon of contemporary aesthetics.

**AESTHETICS’ MODERNITY**

Aesthetics has no original essence, only its history defines its concept, which is deeply connected to the origins of modern art and to the secularization of religious production of images, sounds, objects, and environments. Historical
awareness, need for auto-determination, and rupture within its autonomous tradition are at stake in modern art, whose emergence was linked to aesthetics as a mean to define a new field of practices. Trying to define modern art’s independence from classical art, historicism is complementary to aesthetics’ research for the common aspects of artistic experience. On the other side, complementary to the modern notion of history, aesthetics is also linked to the question of expressing a judgment (of taste, of value, of truth). Kant established that horizon through his conception of aesthetics as judgment of taste. Influenced by Edmund Burke’s stress on sensitive perception as vehicle for a shared apprehension of beauty, Kant concludes with the contemplative nature of the judgment of taste: aesthetic pleasure is famously a “disinterested” one, which is both subjective and universal (Kant, 1911). Aesthetics does not necessarily judge about particular artworks, but it thinks about and fixes up the criteria for judgment – that is aesthetics’ normative dimension, which is neither aprioristic or disciplinary, but a necessary complement to the modern stress upon historicity.

The question of judgment also informs a scission between two complementary approaches to art reflection: aesthetics and modern criticism. Whereas aesthetics reflects upon more general questions, like perception, experience and art itself, criticism is concerned with particular works of art, or artists. Unlike criticism, the main concern of aesthetics is not judgment and promotion of works of art; but, because of that link between aesthetics and criticism, we cannot conceive a completely non-evaluative aesthetics, which may be simply “nonsense.” In postmodern times, while a dismissal of both “aesthetics” and “art” as hermeneutic categories has brought into a crisis the definition of criteria for judgment, nothing demonstrates the necessity to give up the very idea of judgment. Responsive to contemporary dismissal of judgment, Godard’s video installation Vrai/Faux Passeport, is mainly an anachronistic affirmation of the necessity of critical choice, structured as it is upon an oppositional compilation of film excerpts judged as bonus or malus. Literalizing the commercial terminology associated with the DVD, which equates the Latin term “bonus” with merchandising and economic “good,” Godard again provides these words with their reflexive connotations. He opposes the postmodern ideology of the disappearance of criticism; meanwhile, the very absence of assumed criteria for judgment within the piece seems to signal to the viewer the necessity to rethink them in a subjective way.

As modern philosophical thought in general, modern aesthetics has developed another major concern, which is reflexivity, or the drive to reflect upon itself. Aesthetics tries to perceive and debate its own process of thought, and to comment on it: it may conclude with the impossibility of this attempt, like in Husserl’s phenomenology, nevertheless it wonders about it. In art’s
practice, modernism has placed speculative and historical awareness at the very heart of the artwork, so that the artists themselves reflexively inscribe aesthetic concerns into the artwork and within its margins (manifestos, critical writings etc.). Romanticism, then modernism worked through aesthetics, criticism and historicism to introduce reflexivity in art practice. According to Jacques Rancière, we should even replace the very category of modernity with his notion of the “aesthetic organization of arts” (régime esthétique des arts): in a Foucauldian perspective, it is the constellation of principles informing the field of experiences and practices that makes history (see Foucault, 2002).

Throughout the 20th century, aesthetics focused on the question of art, to define what art could or should be. Avant-garde solutions aimed to answer in a militant way, trying to displace the frontiers of art, or to make them “explode” into real life (see Poggioli, 1986, and Bürger, 1984): American post-WWII neo-avant-gardism has tried, according to Harold Rosenberg, to prolong and reinvent that practice, beginning with Action Painting (1972). On the other side, the theory of modernism, elaborated by Clement Greenberg and both institutionalized and criticized by the “postmodernist” journal October, defined it as a formalist attempt to preserve art’s borders, through questioning the specificity of the medium. In the 1950s, these two paths of modernity – avant-garde and modernism – established a new frame of reference, one that posited the interaction between arts and the displacement of art itself. “Neo-avant-gardes” are a paradoxical reactivation of radical modern thought, in which newness depends from looking back to “historical” avant-gardes, ideologically displacing them in a new context, North America, as the new center of artistic elaboration (see Guilbaut, 1983).

Postmodernism, while conceptualizing modernist theories, tried to introduce an avant-garde dismissal of modernism, covering its own ideological purposes through anti-ideological, anti-avant-garde statements. Rejecting modernist and avant-garde radical issues, the postmodern age is the period of canonization of modernity as an all-embracing (“totalitarian”) socio-political theory. While modernism is a historical theorization of an artistic reflexive tendency, postmodernism is mostly cultural and theoretical, it is a social theory of art. Both concur to canonize modern art and to unconsciously prepare something different, a more “neutral,” descriptive, purely immanent category in art history that will be called contemporary art, which works like a sort of “present continuous” situated at the same time within and without history, and going beyond, or denying judgment. Abolishing the distance between art and society, and the autonomy of aesthetic sphere, in this approach, aesthetics goes back to Baumgarten’s or Kant’s science of sensations. Media determines art and society, so that it seems to be paradoxical to speak about authors, genres, movements anymore: literal postmodernism should recog-
nize contemporary “de-defined” art in Mr. Nobody’s street art, that amazes the kids in the streets, not within the white cube of a museum or even in the multi-centered net art, that are yet submitted to traditional artistic institutions, public and authorship. If art dissolves in everyday life, it becomes totally immanent, changing aesthetic reflection into cultural studies: that question of the “death of art” accompanies the developing of modern aesthetics, since Hegel to Adorno, while developing in aggressive conflagrations between art and society as in avant-garde thought or in Kracauer’s (1995) and Benjamin’s (1979) reflections upon the “aestheticization” of everyday life, and the decline of art experience in mass practices, like movies. From this point of view, contemporary technology-driven art practices realize the long path of reification in modern art and thought.

Questioning medium specificity on the one hand and intermedial conflagration of the field of art on the other are the two poles of modernism. That apparent paradox is at stake, for instance, in Michael Snow’s all-encompassing work: attentive to the specificity of every medium he uses, he is able to make ideas circulate from one medium to another, creating fluxes of thought which are among the most accurate, intelligent and ironic contemporary practices. The postmodernist version of media art, as opposed to the supposed modernist “enclosure” within the medium, selects and restores one of those modernist poles in order to create its own tradition, the history of media aesthetics as an anti-modernist technological convergence of arts. So, modernist dialectical heterogeneity between “mediums” is rejected to celebrate the integrative path of “media” to join a sort of neo-classical homogeneity. At the same time, postmodernism reshapes the contemporary art field: the very hypothesis of an aesthetics of media is born from a discursive field that opposes modernist and postmodernist arguments, the exploration of a single medium’s properties and the hybridizing reinvention of different media in a new whole. The reflection on – and celebration of – technology was to be the core of this change, from Marshall McLuhan onwards. The conditions for the possibility of thinking about “media” had to be linked to a new faith in the “extension” of human body and senses: as McLuhan would put it, a new “global village” is born, one in which media strongly determine the subject’s conditions of existence as much as they constitute liberating processes.

**“MEDIUMS” VERSUS MEDIA**

Before analyzing the interactions between aesthetic tradition and the reflection upon media, we ought to introduce the very question of “medium” itself. A medium is an intermediary, a tool for transmission and expression. In the
artistic tradition, it identifies the material or technique used by the artist (oil, pastel, marble, lithography, video, etc.), which can also structure the main genres or singular arts (painting, sculpture, film, music, etc.). The term media indicates the collusion of different communication and information tools in a new signifying whole. At first, it was intended that media were devoted to widespread fruition: they were mass media like journalism, cinema, radio, and television. Mainly thanks to McLuhan’s propositions, “media” came to define the whole system of intermediation tools artificially constructed by men. At present, the term knows both a multimedia extension and a technology-driven restriction: in dominant discourse, it identifies the integrated circulation of data between different technologies, as the computer does when we consider it as a multi-media “platform.” Media are deeply linked to modern technologies of mass communication, like radio, television, and the Internet.8 In modern times, the search for rapid means of transportation after the Industrial Revolution has radically changed our perception of the world (Schivelbusch, 1979); art itself participates in a reinvention of life structured around the need for mediation and circulation of people, merchandise and data (see Kern, 1983, and Crary, 1990). Journalism and information tools (newspapers, TV, the Internet) as mass media are ways of mediating and transmitting contents between people, and they belong to modern circulation processes. Modernity has promoted the transparency of the medium (for different purposes: economic circulation, quick communication of messages), while modernism has tried to make the public aware of the artistic medium, through the artist’s reflection on the materiality of his/her expressive work.

The first and foremost theoretician of “media” has been Marshall McLuhan. Starting with The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962), McLuhan considered electronic media as the major modern revolution. In his view the contemporary world is structured as a “global village”: technological tools are a whole that informs the entire society and even the psychology of the individual, through a “visual homogenizing of experience.” To McLuhan, the introduction of movable type was the great transformation from a composed sensorial experience to the dominance of vision. More generally, McLuhan will consider that the human body and mind are both “amputated” and “extended” by media (1964). Media shape our environment and our perception, becoming more important than the content they convey, which may also be another, older medium: that is the meaning of McLuhan’s famous formula “the medium is the message.”

An operative distinction will be maintained here between “media” as the plural anglicized form of “medium,” and “media” as a new signifying whole (also employed as a singular noun).9 The dialectics between mediums and media in contemporary aesthetics realizes the “double character” of art according to Adorno, that is, the “immanence” of its participation in
modern, capitalist, bourgeois society on one hand, and the “autarchy” of the artwork (1999: 310), its monad-like self-closeness as a separate field, on the other. At the same time, while the unmediated affirmation of media aesthetics as a homogeneous field of practices is establishing a new art paradigm, it simultaneously abolishes internal differences, and simply skips the dialectics between art and technology. Also, we encounter another founding split in the very definition of media aesthetics: we can consider it as a way of thinking about media art, or we can question the sensations linked to contemporary media and multimedia as technologies (TV, computer, mobile, the Internet, GPS navigator, iPod, etc.), as well as the place for subjective perception within the structural effects of media-integrated systems. This way, we again encounter the opposition between art and the world, between artistic devices and socio-economic reality, which has been fundamental throughout the modern age. This very opposition is one of the main issues for media art aesthetics.

On the other hand, we can also wonder about the possibility of reconciliation between art and the world, a sort of return back, in contemporary age, to a pre-modern idea of art as technical skill organized like a “craft.” Among the modern mediums there were some that already operated following industrial methods, such as photography, film, and television. Their inclusion in the art field influenced and reconfigured art itself, eventually shaping new media technology’s domination of traditional art forms and replicating media’s hold on everyday life. For the most part, contemporary artists are more concerned with the articulation and shifting between different mediums than with the expression through single mediums. Media become their primary tools: media is the medium. Media art manages transformations, passages, compositions, and blurs between mediums as its materials, and it encourages us to wonder about the status and effects of these new significant and sensitive circulations through media. Circulations can be dialectical, polarized, crashing, mystical, fluid, and so on: the processes at stake within the artwork and between it and the art world, or the society, will be the main vehicle for expression, meaning and interpretation, and the real issue at stake in the artist’s work.

The split between artistic mediums and media recalls the polarity within aesthetics itself between social and artistic “truth”: media aesthetics reconsiders this opposition in a new, more conciliated way, which tends to reactivate reflections upon technique as an ontological (neo-Heideggerian) or anthropologic (as in Bernard Stiegler’s studies about the permanent link between mankind and techniques) horizon. That may be media aesthetics’ main ideological danger, too: in order to be true aesthetics, media aesthetics has to reflect upon the various forms of interactions between singular mediums and to define new media configurations as such; at the same time, media aesthetics has to reflect critically upon its own ideological implications, as
the reflexive dimension remains consubstantial to aesthetics. Up until now, despite many attempts, media studies and aesthetics still remain two separate fields, communicating along ideological, predetermined paths (this seems to be slightly different in North American thought, where synthesis is more advanced, although the consequences are scarcely investigated). The challenge for contemporary media aesthetics is to make those two different traditions converge, while testing its own legitimacy.

During the debates in the 1960s and 1970s on the liberating potential of video and television, the utopian challenge was one of appropriating technology as a tool for sharing. Media were to be intermediaries that should enable more intensive communication. That was one of those possible convergences of media and aesthetics, reactivated in the 1990s by the Internet’s social impact on our contemporary world. Media as extended interaction among people, communication as the creation of local/global/“glocal” communities: this avant-garde utopia put the autonomy of the art world in crisis, trying to dissolve it in a revolutionary everyday practice. But, as happened to every artistic avant-garde movement, another possible issue was there, under the social utopia: the simple transformation of the art world, of its concept and its economic structures. In the contemporary age of media, the modern tradition of art is exposed to the risk of being determined by technological progress and to lose its relative autonomy from social and economic totality while dismissing the very idea of utopia as an old-fashioned modern issue. Media art is the very place for this paradox: reification of the artwork and demand for artistic status are both contained in its very label.

According to postmodern aesthetics, the media-driven world becomes more and more virtual, mainly through digital media: true or not, this statement brings new ideological issues. But we all know the material and economic dimension of digital data storage, when we lose or break a DVD, a hard disk, or a laptop. New media are not virtual ones, they are material tools embedded in our contemporary, late-capitalist economy: fragile, more and more difficult to repair or to modify, subject to technological (economic) rules, etc. They are intended to make reality virtual, to make the support fragile by pushing it toward an aesthetics of immateriality. It is an old story: media support tends to efface itself, favoring its functions: pragmatic, economic, fictional, aesthetic. Media transparence and the immediacy of communication are economic and ideological drives of the modern age, but even in the contemporary “flexible” media world, reality itself still opposes its materiality. Abstract control systems, video surveillance, or long-distance video-directed bombs are media that seem to replace reality with simulacra. However, despite Jean Baudrillard’s theorizations, simulacra cannot abolish reality, as we ought to admit when “facing the extreme,” such as contemporary wars and their physi-
cal consequences – human and environmental victims; they may only seek to alter our perception of it through virtualization of the information, through the “anesthetic aesthetic” of the virtual. Critical media art often reworks and/or deconstructs the very idea of an immediacy of pure simulacra, embedding geopolitical data in their material configurations and in their perceptive and sensorial effects.

To summarize, McLuhan studied the converging, superimposing and hybridizing transformations that make mediums interact in a media-driven progress: mass media became simply “the media.” Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), while considering mass media too unilaterally, as a totalitarian whole, were right in recognizing the new Kulturindustrie power: cultural industry, while changing its characters and its power, still defines our very horizon, and art itself as a relatively autonomous field of practice has been integrated in the large “global village” of media and in the extended and integrated “society of the spectacle” (Debord, 2004). Will aesthetics itself, as a discrete field of thought, still be possible in a world that has changed, reducing artworks to other objects, abolishing every separateness of the art field, just exploiting the exotic appeal of its uniqueness or exceptionality to make money out of it: in a word, the reification of art? Is aesthetics without art still possible? Studying aesthetics’ perceptual issues from the perspective of immanence in the media world may be the only way to find art’s relevance and urgency within the contemporary world. Or, we may rather discover the importance of its inactuality. The importance of phenomenological aesthetics in our times, often linked to a socio-political reading of the artwork, seems to be symptomatic of a renewal of an aesthetic discourse centering on audience perception.

DEFINING MEDIA ART

The monolithic notion of “media” has to be revised in a more complex articulation between different mediums and a critical study of new media configurations. Due to its hybrid nature, media aesthetics should not be considered a coherent field. As long as the question of understanding artistic phenomena is at stake, the terminology we use or invent can help to positively describe new configurations. Inventing terms for media aesthetics applied to contemporary art allows for an immanent perspective on media art, from the very gesture of describing to more theoretical conclusions. Let us consider some examples of useful terms to understand media displacements, evolutions, and transformations.

Remediation is the historical process of transposition of one medium’s contents and forms into another medium, as for instance the reinvention of
other mediums’ content by digital media, or the television “remediating” film, theater, literature or radio (see Bolter and Grusin, 2000). Intermediality can be defined as the dialogue and circulation between mediums, either within the artwork (in multimedia artworks) or between artworks (like in Mauricio Kagel’s practice, adapting similar questions and contents to music, theater, radio, film, and video) (see Higgens, 1967). Intermediality explores the space and time “in between,” following what Raymond Bellour has defined, in visual terms, “the in-between-images” (“l’entre-images”) (2002). Inframediality can be employed to define the invention spreading at the boundary between mediums, or within the folds of the singular medium: not the back-and-forth between mediums (as with intermediality), but the figures and processes materialized through their collapsing, as with the paradoxical use of theatrical space in Méliès’s films, which transcend into magic thanks to the film-specific art of stop motion, or, considering performance’s original drive towards immediacy, by using several mediums and collapsing them in a unique experience, as in Warhol’s EPI, or Exploding Plastic Inevitable performances (1966-1967). Video art happened to be particularly able to throw different and heterogeneous layers into a whole, which can be simply a mirror of mixed media practices, or an attempt to make them collapse in an ecstatic new whole, as in Aldo Tambellini’s TV performances of the 1960s. As for multimedia, it indicates the synesthetic or reflexive effects of overlapping media, developing the idea of mixed media practice into a more homogeneous way. While mixing and media hybridization both allow the constitution of a new complex whole, transmediality identifies the differential drive before and beyond the artwork rather than focusing on the result. A new configuration can emerge by applying certain elements of a medium’s tradition in new ways; this can reinvent a medium’s meaning and sometimes even its very name. That can be produced with or without a qualitative change: extended media defines the latter option (e.g. the passage from simple video monitor to the very idea of installation), while expanded media refers to the first one (e.g. the multi-projectors experimental film screening).

Giving a name to phenomena can lead one to question the very status of art, its very possibility: since Marcel Duchamp, there is a strong tradition in contemporary art of artists working in that direction. Nelson Goodman’s question “When is art?” (1978) participates in the displacement of aesthetics’ main concern toward the institutional question (see Dickie, 1974), which became more and more crucial in what began to be called the “art world” (Danto, 1964) of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, a decade articulated between self-referential autonomy and expanded practices of art, the neo-avant-gardes tried to reinvent or go beyond the art field. Their art considered its institutional definition, defying and reworking its borders – for instance,
raising questions about the “white cube” (O’Doherty, 1999) of museum space. Avant-garde and neo-avant-garde attempts to go beyond art are followed in contemporary art by an ulterior movement: to reinvent art practice through new media, or new interactions between old media. For instance, film projection in most gallery exhibitions transforms itself in digital video projections within a luminous space: a totally different apparatus and way of reception, yet maintaining the principle of projection. Actualizing the avant-garde project, Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” (2002) goes beyond the art field, analyzing aesthetics from the perspective of social theory and practice. Nevertheless, most of the time and despite its statements, media art mirrors the media world while legitimizing itself as a cultural object through the use of the “art” label, thereby instituting a new, homogeneous environment: while often denied by theoreticians, media art is still considered art, which allows the artist to make a living out of it.

The hypothesis of media aesthetics arises when work made within different and relatively separate mediums blurs into unique signifying and perceptual circulation (a process that digital media accelerate). For instance, when theater goes beyond the fourth-wall rule and invades the spectator’s space, like in Living Theater’s or Odin Teatret’s practice. Since the 1950s the happening, then performance and installation radically changed the channels of perception, so that every work of art starts to define its own devices: the media disposition and organization (the “apparatus” or, in French, dispositif) itself may become the main cue within the artwork. Installations as a tool for participatory art, opened the art field to contemporary immersive, interactive, behavior-driven media practice. Medium specificity or media hybridizing become processes that go beyond the exposition of the work on artwork’s materiality, as well as the fact that they are no longer limited to the technological interaction of devices. So, reflexivity was displaced in favor of conceptualizing the organizational and material processes of the artwork, and the institutional questioning of the limits of an artwork itself.

A new configuration, a pluralist stream of artistic inventions, are at stake in 1960s modernism, whose field of practices opposes the exacerbated enclosure within medium specificity to the synergetic conflagration of different mediums (what we called expanded media). In both cases, modernist hypermediality is an attempt to go through and beyond the medium, in order to reach perceptual overload and to let art explode into life for radical transformation: art faces its own “de-definition.” Within this field of tensions, the drive for immediacy, to go beyond the very notion of a medium, turns out to be a very modernist one, complementary to the exploration of medium’s specificities, and equally reflexive. Postmodernism, as an avant-garde ideology, has appropriated this anti-medial tension in a militant way, creating and dismissing a
frozen notion of “modernism” as medium-enclosed art. In such a context, video seems to have been the main actor to define, and interpret, what we call “media” art. The transfers from one medium to another and the links between them, as well as its ambiguous relationship to television as a mass medium and a mass media gave video a very particular place, radicalizing the similar ambiguity we could have found in cinema. While video allowed the permanence and economic negotiability of ephemeral events such as performances, it was also very important to sustain what has become the main form of the contemporary artwork: the installation.

FROM ART AESTHETICS TO MEDIA AESTHETICS: CONTEMPORARY PATHS

After Duchamp, almost everything could become an artwork (De Duve, 1989), a process that could not work without requiring new justifications. Of late, new rules are in effect: for instance, it is increasingly recommended that an artwork blur its own boundaries. At the same time, we must also recognize that blurring genres or techniques is a very old practice in the field of art, not a privilege of postmodern times; even the avant-garde advocated going beyond art’s limits and to implicate life. Contemporary art seems capable of integrating every possible element of contemporary life within an artwork or its process, thereby reconciling the opposition between sensation and thought in a new aesthetic whole. Moreover, contemporary art tries to go beyond the very idea of the artwork: participative strategies try to open up the experience to interaction, seeming to give to the viewer the power to modify the artwork through his/her attitudes. Media aesthetics can encourage us to wonder about how the disappearance of the artist and of the artwork may also imply the end of art as defined by modernity. We may be returning to a reframing of artmaking as a craft.

The contemporary media artist is mostly determined by socio-economic strategies of transmitting data and goods, but his/her very existence as an artist has survived the postmodern attacks against the art world, and s/he is even positioned as the main agent of the art industry. As Andy Warhol understood very quickly, an artist’s name has become a trademark in contemporary art world: what fills museums is the very name of heroes such as Michelangelo or Matisse, Picasso or Monet. On one hand, big museums seem to have become multinational industries that use their media (artworks, networks, interactive websites, scholarships, and other financial aids, advertisements and merchandising) to create sellable art worlds; on the other, small museums proliferate or survive, linked to “local” issues, although many are deserted. Exceptions to this polarized trend are even more noticeable as “resistant” sites, trying to pre-
serve and to share traditions, the necessity of which is reinforced by their dismissal in present times. But when we consider general trends, thinking about big museums themselves as “media” that organize cultural fluctuations, we see an economic organization that is split between the dense material existence (or passive resistance) of traditional art objects and the lighter materiality of the new technologies employed to circulate them. The museum space is reinvented and reshaped by these economic tendencies, and tries to derive some energetic tension and passage from them.

Passages (Krauss, 1977), hybridizing, differentiating practices (as described in a theoretical way by Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) notions of “rhizome” and “determinantalization”) have become the new rule of contemporary art, rendering obsolete the ancient terminology even in order to simply describe an artwork. The very question of how to define an “artwork” has been at stake in a radical art practice from Duchamp up until conceptual and imaginary artworks; today, this question seems to be answered by emphasizing the processual nature of art, or its globally networked character (for instance, net art17). Art consists of dematerialized flows of information, and is often simultaneously embedded in social life and linked to the art market and the surviving, relocating “art world.” But media aesthetics should avoid falling into the trap of defining the artwork in ways that make it seem “custom-tailored” for academic theory. It is not by chance that postmodernism is first of all a theoretical approach, as I said earlier in this chapter. Against an abstract, “virtual” characterization of the media artwork, the notions that we have recalled or introduced here are simply the new media material tools, reconfiguring art’s discursive field.

Media aesthetics is thus to be understood as a theoretical reflection on thoughts and sensations linked to the articulations between mediums and to media as a whole. Such a definition is both a challenge and a promise. Often, it is also an ideological hypothesis, one that is bounded in technological faith. The typical overview of media aesthetics generally has to choose between a historical survey of different media (music, dance, theater, painting, sculpture, film, video, etc.) and a very partial panorama of art history trying to find precursors of multimedia practices, starting with Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk and culminating in happenings, Fluxus, performance, installation, and the like. Media hybridization and interactivity that create “open” artworks18 are the main ideological values needed in order to draw up a progressive story, something that should be understood as a new discipline’s attempt to discover its own tradition and to embed itself in the history of aesthetics.

When taken in as a real theoretical proposition, the “contemporary” paradigm, in opposition to the “modern,” conveys the idea of a “co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities”19 in a new configuration, as already expressed by Ernst Bloch’s definition: “Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen” (the “con-
temporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” which referred to the – dangerous and violent – coexistence of civilization and barbaric tensions in 1930s Germany). Every technological practice seems to be redoubled by an attempt to use it artistically, and/or to enlarge its uses to make people participate more freely in it. If contemporary art is no longer concerned with subordination, signification, and composition, but rather with “differentiation and coordination,” media art, as a possible object of media aesthetics, seems to present a new constellation in which heterogeneous media are functioning together smoothly. Net art, determined as it is by the technological use of digital technologies and the Internet, seems to achieve exactly this sort of synthesis. It allows interaction between different media, while at the same time it reduces all of them to a homogenous digital matter: the computer platform and the World Wide Web. On the other hand, contemporary art may also propose new forms and configurations rather than new apparatuses, working through the medium to achieve new (and sometimes very old) configurations: think, for instance, of Mark Lewis’ latest video explorations that rediscover simple Lumière-like “views” and multilayered “magic” works inspired by Méliès. Just as with many other contemporary artists, his work is somewhat split between medium-specific art and multimedia installations. As if film, the least “artistic” medium in modernity (as perceived within the field of art, at least), were still a specific apparatus, one that resists definitive appropriation within the museum’s spatiality and temporality. Removed from the black box and placed within the white cube, it becomes something different, something subject to another circulation of time and space, like in home multimedia platforms (see Philippe Dubois’ contribution to chapter 9 in this book). Media aesthetics must consider different degrees of specificity between artworks and mediums/media in order to understand the artworks’ logic.

The main task for an aesthetics of media should be to consider and study medium, media, multimedia, intermedia, and the like as primary elements in artistic practice and/or in the contemporary perception of our cultural environment (media culture, a re-elaboration of the notion of “visual culture” (Mirzoeff, 2002)). It should encourage us to think, raise questions and try to respond to the (utopian or desperate? happy or terrifying?) hypothesis about the collusion between art and media, or between media and the world. Media aesthetics is a paradoxical conjunction of heterogeneous fields that the contemporary age tries to explore and understand. How could the double bind between aesthetics and art survive the presumed, newly proclaimed “death of art” in the media world? Art is probably not dead, but aesthetics seems to return to its origins, to “sensations” and a more general “perceptual” wondering, linked to sociological, scientific, and technological studies. This situation has to be explored, understood, and critically reinvented by contem-
Temporary media aesthetics, starting from immanent analysis but articulating it with aesthetic and art tradition.

Contemporary media art shapes heterogeneous co-presence. But why should we consider contemporary artists who are “still” working within singular mediums as not “current”? Our art field is split between media-driven immanence and anachronistic work within singular mediums. Some great artists articulate both aspects, enclosing more general, social concerns about our media-driven world in medium specificity. But the very idea of “contemporary” art permits one to put forward the idea of a pluralist (a dimension which was already polemically present in postmodernism) as well as differential/oppositional way of thinking about the art field. Painters or sculptors still exist, and they may be also good ones. Contemporary aesthetics cannot limit itself to new technologies only; it has to maintain its freedom to think about all art objects, non-art, and perhaps even the disappearance of art, which was at stake from the very beginning in Hegel’s aesthetics. Aesthetics remains above all a speculative activity, which is initially separate from praxis and marked by this very separation. As Adorno would have put it, the “proper” art field should be separated from society, but this very separation is haunted by the nostalgia of reconciliation within a new, utopian world. Art’s survival as an autonomous field of practices is deeply linked to that fundamental critical position in relation to reality (which is not simply the exhibition of a political idea that the artist assumes to be shared by his/her audience). As the historical process of “modern interpenetration” (moderne Verfransung) invested the arts, contemporary media aesthetics should reconsider that process in a context in which media circulation has become the main material for artistic work, creating new perceptual and artistic qualities. On that basis, aesthetic thinking is always questioning contemporary media, be they artistic or not; eventually, the reconsideration of the ancient question of aisthesis establishes a new starting point for media art aesthetics as a diffracted set of practices.
A symptom of the actuality of this issue is Jacques Rancière’s recent book (2011).

Theodor Adorno: “The idea of a value-free aesthetics is nonsense” (1999: 262).

Made for his 2006 exhibition Voyage(s) en utopie at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

According to Jürgen Habermas (1987), it was Hegel who introduced philosophical reflexivity, so founding modern thought.

See Clement Greenberg’s possibly most famous essay, “Modernist Painting” (1955; originally written in 1960).

The very structure of Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991) seems to be symptomatic of that issue: the first and the second chapters, which are the more general ones, are devoted respectively to culture and theory, while the study of each particular art form’s postmodern condition comes logically later.

In doing so, the North American debate on media joins the European cultural reflection on technique from the first half of the 20th century; see, for instance, Maldonado (1979). However, while European thought has to be understood within a debate where nature and culture, and mankind and technology, opposed each other, in the 1960s, a new technological faith came together with a more pragmatist account of technological transformations.

For Lev Manovich, whom I will not follow here, such a change leads to the replacement of the very notion of “medium” with a more recent word: “software” (2001).

It is the choice made by, among others, Rosalind Krauss (2000).

See the decisive little book by Daniel Birnbaum (2005).

For this notion, it is useful to rethink Bellour’s medium-centered notion of “infra-image” (2002), originating through the unfolding of the images, for instance in Thierry Kuntzel’s videos.

Bob Goldstein seems to have invented the notion to promote an artistic event in Southampton (1966).

A seminal work on media aesthetics is Youngblood (1970). One should remember that Youngblood introduced the important notion of “expanded cinema” not only to speak about multiple projections but to reflect upon the human condition in the new technological environment described by McLuhan, starting from the “metamorphosis in human perception” introduced by the movies, and following its multiple expansions and the changes of human perception.

While Goodman answers with a theory of artwork as an object that “functions symbolically,” I assume his reflection is a symptomatic one, questioning art’s borders to refute the institutional solution.

Danto distanced himself from Dickie’s arguments, arguing his own intention was to understand the conditions of possibility of an artwork, while Dickie searched for reasons for its actuality.
For an account of this approach in contemporary digital art, see Aziosmanoff (2010).

See the presentation made by Vuk Cosic at the conference Net Art Per Se (Trieste, 21-22 May 1996). According to Cosic, this particular art practice ended in 1998 (conference at the Banff Centre for the Arts). See also Weibel and Gerbel (1995).

The paradigm of the “open artwork” was established by Umberto Eco (1989). See also Klotz (1960).

Rancière (2000: 37), while speaking about the modern “esthetic régime of arts,” a label that I consider even more adapted to contemporary situation of arts.

As proposed by Vancheri (2009).


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