Media Arts

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Media arts is an artistic and educational discipline that understands media principally as platforms for creative expression. Media arts draw upon (and often overlap with) traditions within the arts and humanities including visual arts, music, theater, literature, and so forth, making particular use of contemporary media, including digital, networked, and interactive technologies. Areas within media arts may include:

- film, video, and animation;
- graphic and digital arts and effects;
- sound design and music production;
- scenic, costume, and make-up design for screens;
- performance involving media technologies;
- video games;
- interactive, web-based, and networked media;
- virtual and augmented reality.

As both an artistic and educational discipline, media arts emphasize creative expression and critical analysis of multiple media forms, walking a line between arts, humanities, communications, and technology. Given that the discipline makes use of various media and draws upon a range of artistic traditions, media arts are not informed by a single, unified theoretical or esthetic tradition. Analyses of media arts may draw upon frameworks and terminology developed in fields such as cinema studies, cultural studies, media studies, semiotics, critical theory, and so forth.

In the context of media education, media arts are a historically significant tradition, though their perspectives and pedagogies differ somewhat from those that dominate the field of media literacy. Media arts education has been critiqued for its emphasis on technical competence and personal expression at the expense of social or political relevance. However, media arts initiatives commonly make an effort to highlight the integration of theory, production, and politics.

Recently, the media arts have been designated within educational policy as a fifth arts discipline (along with music, dance, theater, and visual arts). This positions media arts education between discourses of "arts literacies" and "media" or "digital literacies." Also, as new media technologies—including, for example, virtual and augmented reality—develop, media arts studies, education, and creative practice attempt to make sense of and make use of these emerging media.

Creative expression

Perhaps one of the most significant characteristics of media arts—especially in the context of other approaches to studying and teaching media and culture—is the emphasis placed on creative expression. Media are understood not simply as channels or networks through which individuals send and receive messages comprised of information, but rather as sites where artists can use deliberate narrative and/or esthetic elements to express their emotions, share their experiences, and explore concepts in conversation with some kind of audience.

While no single understanding of creativity is used across the field of media arts education, the creative process engaged in by scholars, educators, and artists typically includes some of the following.

Cultivation of creative capacities

Media arts initiatives commonly emphasize the value of the creative process as being equally important as the completed work. Within media arts education, objectives include helping student artists identify sites of creative inspiration, including personal experience, existing creative work, esthetic or conceptual traditions within the arts, various techniques, styles, or themes, and cultural, historical, or political context. Studies of historical, theoretical, and esthetic traditions of media and arts disciplines often play a role in this stage. So, for example, preparatory to a screenwriter conceiving of a story for a horror film, she may examine the use of the "final girl" archetype in the genre, study the influence of gothic literature or German Expressionism on early Hollywood monster movies, or reflect on her own experiences with fear or trauma. Media artists learn to draw upon these sources and develop processes for translating this inspiration into the conceptualization of their own work.

Conceptualization of creative work

Drawing upon various sources of inspiration, media artists then develop a central concept for their own work. This "brainstorming" phase is commonly addressed in media arts education contexts, where students are encouraged to record ideas for their creative work, seek feedback from others, create connections between ideas they find compelling, and begin to create some sort of overarching idea that the work will explore. During this stage, media artists may familiarize themselves and experiment with different ways of ways of conceiving, organizing, revising, and connecting creative ideas as a means of developing these fragments into something unified. So, for example, a graphic artist might use a sketchbook to doodle ideas or a Pinterest board to archive visuals they find compelling or the Sketch app to create multiple iterations of a single design as they work toward a final concept. This process of conceptualization of creative work often requires an understanding of the affordances and limitations of the technologies and the media artist's experience with said technologies.

Acquisition of technical skills

Not unlike artists working in other artistic disciplines, in order to practically realize the concept they have developed, media artists must have some understanding of the tools with which they will craft their work. In the creation of a web series, for example, the process may require media artists to have an understanding of the tools and processes of elements such as lighting, sound recording, video-recording, data transfer, video editing, sound mixing and editing, color correcting, creating special effects, uploading, sharing, and marketing via social media, and so forth. Successful media artists, whatever their specialization, often familiarize themselves with various tools that correspond with their area of emphasis, for example, a cinematographer will learn about different cameras and lenses and know which will best serve a particular project. Also, media artists, especially those working on smaller productions like a web series, often take on multiple roles and are required to have some technical competence in various aspects of the process, for example, an editor might be responsible for and must have a working knowledge of transferring the footage, editing audio and video, generating special effects, and exporting and uploading the final piece onto social media. And as new media tools and technologies are constantly being developed, media artists are often continually learning new technical skills and processes, in contrast with, for example, a cellist or an oil painter who, while developing and practicing new techniques, is typically working with the same set of instruments and/or materials. The acquisition of technical skills goes hand in hand with the media artists' development of a conceptual understanding of esthetic conventions and practical experience with technique.

Familiarization with language and conventions

Depending upon the specific medium in which a media artist chooses to create their work, there are corresponding conventions or languages with which the artist must become familiar in order to successfully realize their concept. Studies of semiotics—whether it is of composition or color theory in design, juxtaposition or narrative construction in film or video, and so forth—often play a part in this stage of the creative process. Media arts programs (similar to media literacy education) emphasize the constructedness of media texts, how an artist makes use of specific processes of signification as a means of effectively expressing their concept in their chosen medium. So, not unlike a poet who masters the use of different rhyme schemes or meters, uses of metaphor, or other literary devices, a successful media artist deliberately employs different forms or styles in the creation of their work.

Deliberate development of form and content

As media artists become proficient in the language of their particular craft or medium, they are able to make deliberate decisions about the relationship between form and content of their creative work. This typically involves understanding how a convention of a particular form has been used in context; to tell specific stories, express certain emotions, or explore particular ideas. Examples of this type of study might include

examining the use of narration in documentary to communicate an authoritative perspective on the subject or examining the use of a "retro" pixelated visual esthetic in a mobile game to elicit a feeling of nostalgia from the player. As media artists become familiar with the tools and techniques, languages and conventions of their form, and as they understand the significance of these traditions to explore certain ideas, they are able to create work in which there is a unity of form and content.

Revision and refinement

A significant part of the creative process involves revising and refining the work so that it serves as a successful realization of the artist's vision and reaches and resonates with its intended audience. Media arts initiatives typically devote a large amount of time and effort to this stage of the process, as peers and mentors provide feedback on each other's work. The production of multiple drafts, cuts, or versions is typical of the production of many media arts, though the iterative development process in game design provides an especially effective example of this stage. The development of a video game is substantially comprised of repeated processes of building and testing. Through these play-tests, developers are able to understand what the game communicates to the player (how to play, for example), how the player understands and interacts with the game (what choices players make), whether the game successfully achieves its creator's intentions (whether it is fun, challenging, etc.), and, perhaps most importantly, whether it works (what bugs need to be fixed). Also, this process of revision and refinement often positions the work not simply as the realization of the creator's vision, or a unified work of art but something with which the audience will engage and interact.

Audience engagement

The ultimate goal of most media artists is to share their work with others, though, depending on the media used in the work and the context in which this work is engaged with by the audience, this experience can vary widely. Regardless of the specifics of the presentation/performance of the final work, though, media arts education often emphasizes the significance of this experience as the site where creator, work, and audience can interact. Conversations concerning (and even studies of) audience reception or interpretation often play a part in media arts education. Whether it is a fan-video distributed via YouTube watched on a mobile phone or an installation making use of virtual reality in a museum space, the experience of the audience engaging with the work of a media artist is of special significance.

Critical analysis

In addition to the production of creative work, media arts—and media arts education specifically—often include a component of critical analysis. Theoretical frameworks are introduced and applied in analyses of creative works, with various objectives including esthetic appreciation, ideology critique, examinations of genre, authorship, and so forth. As discussed, given that media arts draws upon multiple artistic disciplines,

philosophical and esthetic traditions, there is a multitude of analytical approaches employed in media arts education including, but not limited to: semiotics, narratology, auteur theory, various esthetic theories, Marxist critical theory, various psychoanalytic theories, media ecology, various critical cultural theories including postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, queer theory, eco-criticism, as well as examinations of media genres, history, industries, and technologies. Oftentimes, critical analysis of media arts serves to prepare student artists to understand and effectively employ a particular esthetic or theoretical concept in the creation of their own work. In other cases, the objective of this critical engagement is to develop an understanding and/or appreciation of a particular tradition, form, concept, and so on.

Media arts and media literacy

Within the context of media education, media arts are a historically significant tradition. Disciplines that are commonly associated with media arts—such as film studies, visual communication, and cultural and media studies—developed over the 20th century and informed the discourse around media literacy (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Along with disciplines like democratic education, critical pedagogy, digital citizenship, youth media, news literacy, and so forth, media arts is a vital part of the field of media literacy, sharing some key concepts and approaches with these other disciplines, while also differing from them in some significant ways.

As discussed, central to many media arts initiatives is the integration of media analysis and production, a perspective shared by media literacy scholars and educators. As demonstrated in the discussion above, media arts education shares the media literacy movement's emphasis on questions of:

- authorship ("Who made this?");
- context ("When was this made?");
- purposes ("Why was this made?");
- content ("What ideas, values, information, points of view are [represented]?");
- technique ("What techniques are used and why?");
- responses ("How does this make me feel and how do my emotions influence my interpretation of this?");
- interpretations ("How might different people understand this message differently?") (Rogow & Scheibe, 2007).

However, as the field of media literacy is dominated by perspectives emerging from communications and education traditions, some of the terminology, analytical frameworks, and theoretical perspectives employed in the field are not often included within media arts education. Commonly absent from most media arts education are discussions regarding, for example, institutions, economics, effects, and credibility. This is not to suggest that media artists and media arts educators are unaware of issues regarding the political economy of the media and cultural industries, the potential power of media to influence attitudes and behaviors, and so forth. Rather, media arts education—due to its roots in the fields of arts and humanities—understand media

texts primarily as esthetic objects and artistic expressions rather than cultural products or media "messages." Some have argued that this difference in perspective, though, positions media arts education as a "marginalized discourse" within the field of media literacy education (Lopez, 2014).

In addition to understanding media in slightly different ways than much of the field of media literacy, media arts education has been critiqued by media literacy scholars for its emphasis on personal expression, esthetic appreciation, and skill acquisition at the expense of critical engagements with media's role in larger ideological, social, and political issues. Kellner and Share (2007) write:

> Many of these programs tend to unproblematically teach students the technical skills to merely reproduce hegemonic representations with little awareness of ideological implications or any type of social critique. (p. 61)

While this argument might be overstated—as the pedagogical approaches in media arts initiatives vary widely—it is not without some justification. The objective of many media arts programs is career development and job placement; thus, an emphasis is placed on the acquisition of technical skills and the understanding of particular conventions, processes, and practices. Also, the link between video production, graphic design programs, and advertising—an industry that is often the subject of scrutiny in media literacy education—may further validate this critique.

However, it may also be pertinent to acknowledge that while media arts education may emphasize personal expression or esthetic technique, many initiatives make an effort to situate these discussions within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Not unlike its sister disciplines the youth media and "maker" movements, media arts education frequently frames creative expression as integrated with cultural participation, civic engagement, and even political activism. In the same publication, Kellner and Share (2007) acknowledge the potential political significance of increased emphasis on media arts in public education, writing:

> Incorporating the arts and media production into public school education holds important political benefits for making learning more experiential, hands-on, creative, expressive, and fun. Media arts education can bring pleasure and popular culture into mainstream education, thereby making school more motivating and relevant to students. (p. 7)

Media arts education's emphasis on creative production often allows for more self-directed learning. Its engagement with popular culture allows educators to connect the curriculum to students' everyday lives, validate their interests and experiences, as well as challenge the understanding of legitimate knowledge in traditional education. And media arts' emphasis on personal expression invites students to exercise agency not just as artists, but potentially as citizens and activists. As student artists produce "alternative media"—from "block-umentary films" to "games for change"—they are expressing themselves, sharing their experiences, but also participating in civic discourse.

Additionally, on closer examination, the contrast articulated by Kellner and Share between media arts education and critical media literacy reveals false dichotomies between theory and practice, esthetics and politics. Nearly any study of esthetic traditions will reveal that historically, esthetic techniques have been developed

and employed in the arts (and media arts specifically) not simply to achieve some conception of "beauty" or "unity," but rather as means of effectively communicating specific ideas or emphasizing particular perspectives. The esthetics are practical demonstrations of the theoretical concepts, and their underlying political philosophies.

For example, within the tradition of cinema, the integration of media theory, production, and politics is exemplified by filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein.

Eisenstein is among the most prominent Soviet filmmakers and is credited for the development of the "montage method" of filmmaking. His films *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1927), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) (among many others) practice the juxtaposition of strikingly dissimilar images as a means of producing specific responses in the audience and advocating for particular ideological perspectives. This technique is probably most famously demonstrated in the Odessa staircase sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* in which shots of marching Cossack soldiers are cross-cut with scenes of fatally injured peasants and crying children. Eisenstein wrote extensively—in his books *The Film Sense* (1942) and *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (1949) and numerous essays—about the use of visual language to communicate revolutionary ideology.

It follows, then, that while media arts' principal interest may not be in, for example, the political implications of works of art, the subject of ideology has been and remains an important concern within the tradition. The scholarship surrounding "visual literacy"—often associated with media arts education—while emphasizing the process of signification in contemporary media, acknowledges the importance of examining texts in relation to context (Messaris, 1998). Zettl (1998), for example, advocates for an approach to visual literacy that allows for "contextual media aesthetics" (p. 84), which includes an understanding of *esthetic elements and structures of screen images,* how these elements and structures are processed by our own *mental maps*, and how those mental maps function within larger *intellectual and cultural frameworks*.

Media arts, literacies, and technologies

As of 2014, the United States' National Core Arts Standards identifies media arts as an arts discipline. The identification of media arts with the disciplines of music, dance, theater, and visual arts, signals an important development in media arts education. While media arts has and continues to have a presence in educational disciplines as varied as communications, technology, arts, and humanities, this institutional acknowledgment of media arts as an arts discipline may signal a shift in how media artists, scholars, and educators understand their work and position themselves within artistic, academic, and educational contexts. For example, the extent to which media arts educators will continue to approach their pedagogy with the principles of media literacy (access, analyze, evaluate, and create) as opposed to the standards of arts education (creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding, and connecting) will be determined by the scholars and artists, teachers and students working in the discipline (Jensen & Draper, 2015; National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007; National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014).

And last, as media arts already integrates multiple media forms, utilizing a variety of tools and technologies, the discipline will likely continue to creatively engage with emerging media platforms and technologies, so that in addition to film and video, games, and graphics, media artists in the years to come will draw upon holographic technologies, biometric media, and mixed reality in their creative work.

SEE ALSO: Arts Education with iPads; Arts Literacies; Authorship and Participatory Culture; Creative Works; Digital Storytelling; Documentary Analysis and Production in Media Literacy; Film Education in Europe; Game Design in Media Literacy Education; Media Education Research and Creativity; Performance Media; Production in the Pedagogic Project of Media Literacy; Remix Culture; Understanding Media Literacy and DIY Creativity in Youth Digital Productions; Visual Literacy; Youth Media

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Further reading

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