

Editorial by Irina Aristarkhova

The Tyranny of the Possible

Several recent conversations with concerned colleagues during new media art events have compelled me to think over what I see as a “tyranny of the possible” in new media art practice. The following, therefore, are my reflections on this relationship between new media art and technological possibility [1].

First, let us go back just a little, almost a hundred years back:

The word “art,” etymologically speaking, means to make, simply to make. Now what is making? Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red, putting some of it on the palette, and always choosing the quality of the blue, the quality of the red, and always choosing the place to put it on *canvas*, it’s always choosing. So in order to choose, you can use tubes of paint, you can use brushes, but you can also use a ready made thing, made either mechanically or by the hand of another man, even, if you want, and appropriate it, since it’s you who chose it. Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting [2].

I would argue that this lesson of “choice” as “the main thing” in art making—especially in relation to new information, communication and biotechnologies employed in the new media arts—urgently needs to be revisited. Unlike painting, which has been transformed and is still being transformed by that lesson, other art forms are particularly vulnerable to the tyranny of the possible, when little thought is given to the question of choice *as the main thing*. When the urgency of such reflexive judgment is not enacted, when one is not constantly vigilant about one’s choosing (even if such awareness decides on “letting oneself go”) among the *technically possible* options, then one’s art becomes a mere exemplar of the possible.

It has been often stated that the art of the 20th century has made the artist less subservient to the medium. Based on this, some have even claimed that the medium does not matter—whether it is new or not. One does not make art because one has a hand, or because there is paint in a tube, or one has a com-

puter or a wireless device. Therefore, it does not matter, or better—*it should not matter*—what media an artist is working with, she or he can choose to be a painter, a performance artist or a new media artist. Therefore, *anything* has become possible in terms of media. As de Duve puts it, after Duchamp we are left with the “tradition of whatever” in art making. Anything is possible—anything whatever.

There is a tradition of the whatever, there is a history of the whatever It aligns judgments, since each work that is part of this history is made up of nothing but judgments, or choices The judgment through which the tradition of the whatever is transmitted that is, must I repeat? Translated and betrayed—is aesthetic judgment So that the name of art became synonymous with anything-whatever [3].

More than any other art form today, it seems, new media art has benefited from and claimed this tradition of the art of “anything whatever”—code, robotics, virtual reality, proteins, stem cells—the list seems endless. This is the art of anything that comes after the “new”; or what I call *any media art*. When anything is possible it is, surely, both a freedom and a risk. One needs to invoke the ability to create by way of a making that results from a reflexive judgment about that which is available and a vigilance about the seductions of the simply possible. To move forward, it seems, one needs to resist the tyranny of the possible—to ensure that the reflexive moment is not swallowed by the immediacy of the Next Big Thing.

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References and Notes

1. I would like to thank in particular Alessio Cavallaro, Steve Dietz, Faith Wilding, Ken Rinaldo and Gunalan Nadarajan for sharing their ideas.
2. Marcel Duchamp quoted in Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) p. 161.
3. de Duve [2] pp. 363–365.