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Technological Innovation and Its Repurposing of Art in Contemporary Society

In December 2017, I visited the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to view an installation there called the Rain Room. Once inside, I saw that the room was mostly dark; a spotlight from one corner of the room illuminated the shimmering raindrops, rendering them almost individually perceptible. Against the harsh light, bodies appeared in silhouette. The floor was essentially a 1,500-square-foot metal drain, and as I passed through the installation's torrent of water, sensors detected my presence and the rain directly above me came to a stop, allowing me to alter the 'weather' with each footstep. I, along with a friend and five others in the room, were given a time period of fifteen minutes to fully immerse ourselves in this experience.

Designed by Koch and Ortkrass, the Rain Room, on the surface, appeals aesthetically to viewers. The majority of the observers that visit the Rain Room go to capture photos and videos of it; in fact, according to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* by Deborah Vankin, a search on Instagram alone yields that more than 53,500 photos have been tagged with the installation's name ("First Look Inside LACMA's Rain Room"). The reason that the Rain Room is so enticing may be attributed to its visual effects as they are both unique and beautiful, enabling the formation of a haunting environment. The Rain Room, then, fulfills the most rudimentary and superficial purpose of art: creating a mood. Though this is a motive in itself, does the utilitarian value of art move beyond this point? Many of those well-versed in artistic expression have stated that art serves no true function if only to prompt a sentimental reaction from viewers. In fact,

Oscar Wilde, the famous British playwright, once wrote in a letter, “Art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way.” By this reasoning, art exists simply for viewing pleasure. But art has other purposes; often, they take deeper analysis to be fulfilled; since most people do not want to put in this extra consideration of work, they end up dwelling only on the superficial nature of an artwork’s appearance. Though aesthetics are important in visual arts, they serve greater purpose than just to offer ‘pleasure.’ Aesthetics motivate art further in more intricate purposes to convey political, cultural, and societal messages.

In his paper, “Pandora Revisited: Art and New Technologies,” Nell Tenhaaf argues for this value of art as an instrument of aesthetic motivation. He states that during the artistic movements of Dadaism and Constructivism, “[art] sought to address the industrialization of daily life and technologization of production that characterized the period of World War I and immediately after” (Tenhaaf, 19). Clearly, then, art served some sort of purpose, though this purpose may have been detached and impersonal to viewers unless deeply analyzed. Through going to many different museums, though, I have noticed a change in this trend of art ushered in by new technologies and the incorporation of such technologies into art. Technology has allowed art to become more personal and interactive, creating pieces in which, as Frank Popper asserts in his essay, “The Place of High-Technology Art in the Contemporary Art Scene,” “physical and directional movements of the spectators allow them to discover a virtual space superimposed on a real space” (67). I have seen and experienced that this interactivity allows for a fully immersive artistic experience, allowing viewers of a work to relate, understand, and feel more personally the thematic message of art through interacting with the piece directly. Because I have experienced this myself through various installations such as the Rain Room, I can observe that

most spectators, then, have the ability to become more than just viewers; they are given the ability to transcend a two-dimensional canvas and become part of the artwork itself. By actively interacting with a piece, viewers are no longer just viewers: they become integral parts of the piece; without the participant, the artwork would be incomplete, and for each participant, the artwork is different, but this is the desired effect of the artist. Therefore, technology has ushered in new change regarding art, allowing for art to become more tangible than before.

Rolf-Dieter Herrmann, in his essay “Art, Technology and Nietzsche,” explores the functionality of art in this manner as defined by the principles of Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, and his ideology of “the advent of nihilism” (Herrmann, 96). Herrmann asserts that, according to Nietzsche, “the relationship of man and world [is that man must] ‘humanize’ the world, i.e., to feel [him]self more and more [a] master within it...” (97). He translates this notion to art, further stating that “what really matters is that we experience [art] projects on a primarily preconceptual level, that they interest us because of their physical presence, that they stimulate our senses and elicit our direct participation before we begin to theorize about them and, thus, put them at our disposal” (Herrmann, 102), highlighting that art is given its purpose through experiences that occur in the immediacy of the moment and from what viewers can glean from it personally. I have seen that technology comes into play, then, by allowing heightened interactivity between a spectator and an art project. The resulting product of such a combination allows for new, unique experiences and can more profoundly pull in its spectator, ultimately amplifying and repurposing art as something that serves a tangible, meaningful, and personal purpose.

In the Rain Room, I could feel all of these elements at work. Before entering the installation, the usher at the entrance gave a brief description of how the Rain Room worked. He

told me that there are ten 3D cameras detecting body motion and a custom drop ceiling in the gallery made up of 1,600 tile-like squares, each packed tightly with 36 tiny sprinkler-nozzles releasing rain. Moreover, they're controlled by computers in a back room that also feature a water treatment and recycling system. The Rain Room manages to explore the way human beings coexist in an increasingly digital universe in a sensual and artificial manner. In an interview conducted with the *LA Times*, Koch, one of the creators of the installation, stated that he and his partner were “exploring the consequences of living in a machine-led world. In the Rain Room we amplify one aspect of that, which is a space that permanently sees you and observes you. It's a surveillance machine in a way” (Vankin, “First Look Inside LACMA’s Rain Room”).

I, myself, felt hyper-aware of the space around me as I made my way slowly across the room. Because of the fact that I, with every step I took, had control over where the rain fell, I originally felt some agency, but after moving around for about five to ten minutes, I began to realize that I was not the one in control. When I stood in one place or walked around carefully, I noticed that I would stay dry, but if I made quick movements and ran through the installation, the rain would still fall on me and I’d get wet. If I was the one truly in control, then I would’ve stayed dry even while running around, but because the cameras only registered slow movements, I realized that in truth, I was the one being controlled; to be an effective contributor in the Rain Room, I had to move around at a leisurely pace, meaning I did not have freewill over the speed of my own actions. In my final moments in the Rain Room, I noticed that the only way for me to have been an active participant in the rain’s movement was if the rain, or the room, could observe *my* movements, and I remembered the information that the usher had told me. The notion of cameras watching me intensified, and it was slightly unnerving. Some other viewers

were still busy trying to catch the perfect photo, and I picked up on an ironic nuance: though the room was watching us, some were observing the room through their own camera lenses. This prompted me to consider a crucial implication: how did technologies like cameras and computer-regulated functions lead the transformation of art in contemporary society?

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin first analyzed the profound shift in the relationship between technology and art represented by the inception of the camera as such a tool for cultural production. In his book, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin revealed the technology of the camera as a vehicle for new perceptions that would fundamentally alter the definition of art and its impact on society. Additionally, in Benjamin's view, technology played a mediating role in art as he stated that "magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web" (Benjamin, 16). Here, he is describing the interrelatedness between the person controlling the camera, the tool, and the reality that the tool reproduces but also affects. Moreover, I will bring attention to the fact that all of these subjective perspectives will ultimately affect the audience's relationship with those same elements. Popper shares this thought, stating that "simulation and interactive manipulation" on behalf of the creator of an artwork can utilize technology to form relationships between all parties involved (68). For example, when talking about art used as a commentary on current global conditions, Popper brings up the point that "trying to equalize technological and aesthetic factors and by putting the accent on such global problems as the environment and interactivity between the artist and the machine, and the inclusion of the public in the creative process" leads to "dynamic and creative interrelationship[s] between humans and their artefacts" (68-69). This concept can be applied to all messages and themes that any artist wishes to convey; the most significant consideration to

take away from Popper's claims is that art and technology (such as cameras) have the ability to increase interrelatedness between the artist, the spectator, and the camera itself.

Ironically, though, Benjamin, in addition to his first point regarding cameras and their involvement, stated that "true art is the illusion of a reality that is free of all equipment" (21). With this claim, the invisibility of the camera and its techniques in the filmic or photographic product brings up the notion of a neutral presence. This perpetual seamlessness is the central premise of today's mainstream, commercial production in film, television, and advertising. I assume, then, that the weight or presence of a digital observer should not be felt in order for an artwork to remain pure in its desires.

These same ideas are also echoed in the Rain Room: the installation attempts to comment on a current condition of society by utilizing technology, but that technology is camouflaged by aesthetics composed of raindrops, darkness, and a harsh light source. According to Benjamin's definition, because of the regular audience member's inability to realize the surveillance that is being imposed on them, the artwork's message is purely demonstrated. In addition, the technology used in the Rain Room very much enhances the relationship between active participant and installation; the two play off one another in movements. Wherever I stood, the rain did not touch me. Without me, the installation would not have been complete or served its full purpose, and without the installation, there would have been nothing of the artistic sort for me to have interacted with and learned from. Though not everyone may know that the Rain Room's technology utilizes cameras, the majority of the people, about five out of seven of my group members, recognized the interrelationship of their behavior and the rain, and this hyper-awareness gave way to Koch and Ortkrass' goal of creating an environment of surveillance. Ironically, though, when the spectators of the installation pulled out their phones to take photos

and videos of the exhibit, a bit of the artwork's potency seemed to be lost. Instead of feeling the eyes of something there, some were purely absorbed in reminiscing in the installation's aesthetic nature. This presence of cameras, therefore, goes to prove Benjamin's second point regarding their felt presence bringing about a tainted, impersonal interpretation of the Rain Room. I can conclude, then, that how cameras affect art is different depending on the nature of its presence.

In summary, the invention of the camera and transferring this information through computer-regulated functions has repurposed art so that one "[has] only the moment and no anticipation of anything beyond it" (Herrmann, 101) and so that a "complex relationship [can] exist between human beings and... scientific phenomena" (67) and art. Most importantly, though, and not yet discussed in detail, are the implications that all of these things have on the viewer of a piece. The last thing to be addressed, then, is how this technological relationship eventually paved the way for computer-regulated functions in installations to be used in art in order to further the relationship between man and art and greater society, an idea that I have already lightly discussed.

This relationship is based on art's ability to reflect on societal conditions. Because of technology's establishment of interrelatedness, viewers can better feel, understand, and empathize with a theme that a certain piece of artwork may be commenting on, but it moves further than that. Kenneth Gergen, in his essay, "Technology and the Self: From the Essential to the Sublime," analyzes how technology has affected the human psyche. He states that because of technology, "psychological essentialism is undergoing a subtle but increasingly discernible erosion... we are witnessing... a progressive emptying of the self... With the profusion of technologies specifically designed to increase the presence of others, we obliterate the conditions necessary for sustaining belief in the obdurate interior" (Gergen, 2). Here, Gergen asserts that the

amassment of technology has depleted one's sense of individualism, ushering in the establishment of a more collective society. Transferring Gergen's beliefs over from technology to the incorporation of technology into art, I can observe that technology has not only made it easier for people to connect with others, but also with artworks, intensifying art as active social and political commentary. When technological art touches on ideas that have to do with such subjects, people can greater experience them with newfound empathy and positioning because technology has the ability to place them immediately and directly into that situation. The loss of the sense of self that Gergen addresses, then, can be found once more in the collective body that is art. For example, the Rain Room explores the coexistence of humans in a digital universe that omnipresently observes its participants by placing humans in that digital universe. I see no better way of understanding the sufferings of surveillance than by experience its overbearing presence myself.

This tangency allows for the effects of art to be more potently profound; conveyed messages become more like calls to action because stepping into an environment that can be felt allows for more personal understanding and interaction, leading to more easily moving the viewer of an installation. And often, these environments are politically charged. Christina Chau, in her book, *Movement, Time, Technology, and Art*, states that insufficient art "fails to acknowledge the social and technological contexts in which time-based art were made;" especially now, when "[art is] undergoing uncertainty during technological change in society (Chau, 59)." The Rain Room, acting as sufficient art, can be seen as a commentary on the National Security Agency spying on U.S. citizens using smart devices or on the inability to escape the ever watchful gaze of technology, both contentious and relevant topics that Americans can feel the effects of today. When I was in the Rain Room, that effect of surveillance made me

uncomfortable; I value privacy, and after leaving the installation, I championed freedom from disturbance more than before, vowing to protect it at high costs. So I come to the conclusion, then, that Oscar Wilde was incorrect in his assumption that art is useless and incapable of rousing its viewers; if an emotion is felt deeply enough, then I am sure that action on the viewer's part will follow naturally.

Tenhaaf asserts that art and technology is “a promise of liberation through the productivism of the machine age” (20), and Herrmann brings up a similar notion when he addresses the idea of “emancipat[ing] oneself from... emancipation... to provide [us] with an awareness of ourselves and of our exceptional role in the world” when viewing art properly, taking into consideration its unique imprints on different individuals (97). I have observed the common theme in my research, then, of technology having the ability to help art in our day and age become even more effective in the communications of its thoughts, leading to freedom and agency that allows individuals to transcend shallow and divisional boundaries.

In conclusion, art has the ability to provide viewing pleasure and societal commentary, but paired with technology, art can grant more palpable gratifications through the direct experience and redemption of a viewer by allowing him or her to become part of an artwork. This transcendence past the canvas of a two-dimensional artwork allows for spectators to be more than mere viewers; as they become active participants, they can more heavily involve themselves in a piece, even going so far as becoming a vital fragment of the artwork itself. Gergen states that “If we succeed in losing the self, we may be prepared for a conjoint reality of far more promising potential” (20), so if we succeed in losing ourselves in art, we can achieve more than without such a process: the more interconnected society becomes, the more empathy and uniformity exists in addressing large concerns, thereby increasing the possibility of positive

change in the world. Using art, like the Rain Room, can bring to the surface relevant topics to consider, such as the effects of surveillance, so that actions towards the evasion of such oppression may be taken. But this effect can only be achieved if an installation or piece of art can create a hyper-aware space that allows people to position themselves, whether that be in a position of dominance or subordination, the latter being what I experienced during my time in the Rain Room. These effects may be enhanced and complexified by the nature of cameras, depending on whether their presence is felt or not; because I did not originally feel the presence of the camera in the Rain Room, the unsettling eeriness that I felt in the moment I realized I was being controlled was more intense than had I known the cameras were what was working behind the scenes in the first place. In essence, art “wishes to create a new world in which improved human behavior would be possible” (Chau, 42), and technological advancements have birthed improved interaction with art. Technology, then, not only enhances art as something fundamentally oriented towards civilization, but also enhances the collective, human experience – an incredible, modern-day phenomenon in which everyone should attempt to be a part of.

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