

New Forms of Contemporary Aesthetics: A Review Article of New Works by Camerotti and Quaranta

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Recommended Citation

Mantini, Marina. "New Forms of Contemporary Aesthetics: A Review Article of New Works by Camerotti and Quaranta." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.4 (2012): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2059>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2059)

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Volume 14 Issue 4 (December 2012) Book Review Article 11
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/11>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 14.4 (2012)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/>>

Marina MANTINI

**New Forms of Contemporary Aesthetics:
A Review Article of New Work by Camerotti and Quaranta**

In this article I review Alfredo Camerotti's *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing* (2009) and Domenico Quaranta's *In Your Computer* (2011). While both books are about the impact of new technology, the point of departure of the two texts is different: Camerotti's work is about journalistic functions of art (and vice versa) and Quaranta's volume is a collection of his articles published between 2005 and 2011 about new forms of art, such as Net Art, Digital Art, and the blurred limits of "hacktivism," etc. Both texts are surveys of the complex landscapes of current communication and information practices and with focus on artistic expressions and representations about informative and political content. The theoretical hypothesis of Camerotti — who asserts the necessity of a juxtaposition of genres — complements work presented in Quaranta's volume on new forms of art made with new technologies and the complex cultural context of society today. The contemporary artistic field in new media known as Net Art (controversial a designation it may be), even if it is claiming independence of artistic expression from any ideological or political commitment, in the end seems to result in inevitable criticism and more often a mockery of hegemonic cultural and social systems.

Camerotti's *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing* and Domenico Quaranta's *In Your Computer* represent reflections about contemporary approaches to art and the relationship between information, art, and political commitment with mixed points of view made possible by new technologies. The main topic of the two texts is contemporary art, but not only defined as an artistic product, but as the human need to give meaning (in a semiotic sense) to realities, creating them, and making sense inside ever more hybrid cultures. At a first glance, the books have different declared objectives, goals, and structures. Camerotti's book is a metatext and Quaranta's volume is a collection of articles. Nevertheless, we find in them the same objective to investigate the complex and blurred artistic spaces and representations of reality and the suggestion is that all contemporary art is inevitably focused on current social issues and it criticizes and parodies the system.

Camerotti's aim is to test the hypothesis that "with the art world's fervent grip of the journalistic approach, the production of truths ... shifted, and is shifting, from the domain of news media to the territory of art. If this holds true, the next question would be: does aesthetic journalism function as an instrument to provide orientation within the flux of information?" (69). He declares his *intentio auctoris* (Eco 11) in the middle of his text and this is because he uses the typical journalistic style. The format of the book resembles a newspaper's article, i.e., using summary frames inside the text. The five W-s (What, Where, When, How and Why) are used by Camerotti in the titles of the chapters of his book in order to explain the central theme, which is a specific genre of information: aesthetic journalism: "Aesthetics is that process in which we open our sensibility to the diversity of the forms of nature and convert them into tangible experience" (21). From the start, Camerotti refers to aesthetics with regard to art, because he maintains that art always has had the chance of understanding information by questioning it. On the contrary, journalism has only been about reporting reality. The aim in question here relates to the fact that traditional journalism is now losing fuel in its function of making sense of reality and successes. Journalism, in its traditional form of reporting/informing about reality, is in crisis. The press is the media sector that is undergoing the most radical and extensive changes at the moment — around the world — and this would appear to bring into question the very existence of professional journalism. The journalistic profession has been associated, over time, to values of independence, freedom of expression and information, and ideals including neutrality and objectivity. Unfortunately, we know that this idealistic point of view is far from reality. As Camerotti remarks, daily professional duties make it difficult for journalists to follow these guidelines because of different factors related to pressures, both external (applied by owners, politicians, and advertisers) and internal (applied by managers and editors) (27). Moreover, many "influences" imposed on journalists are related to the deep-rooted transformation of the sector owing not only to new technologies (and the social use of them), but also to the commercialization of information and the bottom line of costs.

According to Camerotti, the tasks of interpreting and analyzing information in order to turn it into news and the possibility of influencing the agenda throwing minority issues into the public arena and making them more visible are no longer journalistic priorities. Information theory and text analysis studies qualified objectivity and neutrality as strategic rituals through which journalists protect themselves from possible criticism from their public or their superiors, as well as the initiation of legal proceedings (Camerotti refers, among others, to Gaye Tuchman's work). Moreover, in order to contextualize the thesis of Camerotti's book, it is useful to remember that news consists of historically and culturally situated discourses, making sense and building reality (see, e.g., Abril 209) and that journalists continuously mediate experiences and interpretations of the world for the citizens (see, e.g., Peñamarín 67). These affirmations on the constructivist and subjective character of reporting an assumed reality is the same concept of reality being questioned currently by artists and this is the essence of aesthetic journalism described by Camerotti. He argues that the added value of an aesthetic approach to information is precisely the construction of reflections able to question the representations proposed, instead of just accepting them.

Today, the margins between artistic and information practices are blurred (see, e.g., Lyotard): indeed, we rely on a mosaic of hybridized genres, styles, and languages in information (i.e., infotainment or gonzo journalism [Hunter S. Thompson (on Thompson, see, e.g., Jirón-King <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss1/5>>] or the genre between novel and reportage [e.g., David Foster Wallace (on Wallace, see, e.g., Bissell)]). Camerotti argues that documentaries, the internet, and advertising are all close to features of aesthetic journalism. From the beginning (i.e., Dziga Vertov's 1924 documentary film *Kinoglaz* [Kino-Eye]) and from its name, the documentary is a genre devoted to authenticity and truth (documents), although lately the factual and the real have been hybridized with the arrival of "fake documentary," documovies, biopics, etc. Moreover, the internet is where everyone is at the same time producer and consumer (prosumer) and professional journalistic products can be made by citizens (e.g., crowd sourcing or citizens journalism). Open access to information can make possible a deontology of journalism related to the need of reporting multiple angles on a story. I agree with Camerotti, but to me "consciousness" is more of an ideal, a potentiality than a reality, but it is to bear in mind that a huge digital divide still exists between industrially developed and under-developed countries, as well as censorship practiced in many supposedly developed countries) and surprisingly, Camerotti stresses the aesthetic component as one of the main elements of advertising when a commercial goal is achieved without commitment or documentary information. I think that the name of this "aesthetic side" of advertising is social corporate responsibility and in European countries receives tax refunds. However, it is true that the point here is not the intention, but the effect. Thus, creative treatment and aesthetic attitude towards information have altered the relationship between journalism and audience and it seems to be more effective than other practices.

In conclusion to his chapter "Where is Aesthetic Journalism?" Camerotti presents a summary from its Renaissance origins (with figures such as Brunelleschi or Alberti) up to contemporary examples of artistic use of documentation and information methodology (performers like Orlan or Gilbert and George) and social critics (Dan Graham or Martha Rosler). Camerotti presents a collection of contemporary artists and projects and he focuses especially on the poetic potential of politics and aestheticization of the political and suggests that what could be a common feature of different artistic expression: "under scrutiny, in the end, it is not the appropriateness of the journalistic content exhibited in art, but rather its methodology: the way in which artists use these forms, overturning both the traditions of journalism and art" (98).

Quaranta's volume contains his articles published previously on contemporary art expressions, mostly written between 2005 and 2010 for exhibitions catalogues, printed magazines, and online reviews. In the case of *Aesthetic Journalism* the core message is that aesthetic attitude is the methodology which makes it possible to inquire reality. In *In Your Computer* the computer is the art (paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message"). In fact, Quaranta explains the title of the book and its central theme simultaneously: "a difference ... remains: between those who have learned to enjoy their computers as the site for a legitimate, direct, authentic experience of art and those who still perceive them as conveying a mediated, indirect experience of art; between those who understand the strange mix of intimacy — it's here on my screen — and

monumentality — it's out of there, in the public domain, accessible to everyone that all on line artworks possess; and those who still prefer to buy art in print form or as an edited video" (3). The difference between "traditional" art and Net Art is the possibility of experiencing it on "your" computer, which reminds one of the hacker slogan "we love your computer. We also get inside people's computer. And we are honoured to be in somebody's computer. You are very close to a person when you are on his desktop" (Jody qtd. in Quaranta 3). Actually, the question here is the space, radically changed by the advent of new technology and the internet. For Camerotti internet is a space, not a medium. Moreover "the term Net Art doesn't describe a medium but a citizenship. It is more similar to 'American Art' than 'Video Art.' But while terms such as 'American Art' make little sense today ... the term Net Art makes more sense than ever, because more and more people think about themselves as netizens, that is 'citizens of Internet.' Net Art is the art made by netizens" (169). This shift presupposes a radical change in the artistic field: different genres have been created during the short life of computer art, although paradoxically some write already about the "history" of Net Art.

Articles in Quaranta's volume discuss different projects and works, both real and virtual, such as Second Front (a group of artists living only in Second Life), interviews with the most famous of them, and a presentation of expositions. Notwithstanding, in this *mare magnum* of artistic anthology, the actual difference with conventional art is the parameter of space which over time has been completely reversed. Space and time have no more limits and creativity could run through the barriers of the real and material world. In addition, the experience of art is distinct: it is personal and intimate, such as only personal computers could be and at the same time accessible to all. Thus, controversial questions are raised in the volume. For example, the disappearance of "aura" (see Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art*), which problematizes the essence of art and whether new technologies allow infinitive copies and re-mediation (called "re-enactment" in Quaranta's book). Quaranta states that obviously it is possible to realize infinitive and exact copies of a computer file without loss of quality or material difference. Placing this file online multiplies the possibility of copies in the world. However, there is a difference and this is the image of a file, i.e., its visualization. There is something one cannot visualize not because of its technical impossibility, but because of a sort of "ethical code" and respect for Net Art: the image of digital file in the computer can be located just as much in an exhibition, where it regains its "aura." Moreover, a website fits perfectly into Benjamin's definition of aura and it again connects with the concepts of time and space: the contemporary experience of distance/closeness and the here and now of a website. Finally, the actual impossibility to capture the essence of every art. Again, space and time parameters denote the aesthetic experience of new art or computer art.

Most of the experiences of net artists anthologized in Quaranta's volume are concerned with re-mediation of other media in a creative practice of "postmodern citationism" (119). The artists interviewed do not seem to worry too much about problems of copyright, because re-mediation is the most common form of creating art. Today's society lives in a constant mediation, which substituted direct experience. The appeal is just in the ambiguity of re-enactment and in how is it possible to manage both the power of media and the critic of the same media experience. Net Art seems happily to resolve irreducible contradictions inside our cultures by simply involving them by a subjective point of view like "para-consistent" theory suggests: a new form to describe the world by means of self-narratives processes (see García Gutiérrez 124). In addition, Net Art represents a new form of appropriation of signs conferring on them another sense, like other subcultures of the past. Many artist of this new generation are interested in problematizing the same technologies they use for creating their art. They are questioning the motivations and possible impacts of this new development, but in what and how do they differentiate themselves from other avant-garde movements? They simply do not care about these distinctions, they just do it in the same way artists described by Camerotti are making news. In sum, the aesthetic attitude is the core of the process.

In conclusion, both books I review here reflect an aesthetic attitude common to contemporary art, which leads inevitably to a sort of political commitment. Although to elaborate on this matter is not my objective here, I refer to the fact that in some cases political commitment is rejected explicitly by the artists including the subversive talent and ability to criticize society and its corollary systems. As Quaranta writes "Like it or not, if we can still talk about political art, appropriation, process, open work and new moderns, it is largely thanks to the World Wide Web" (22). In other words, the world wide

web allows the form of aesthetic journalism as presented by Camerotti, as well as a methodology of inquiring and questioning the world. Both are expressions and possibilities of thinking of our contemporary and complex world and making sense of it.

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