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Art and Electronic Media: Firing a Canon at the History of Art

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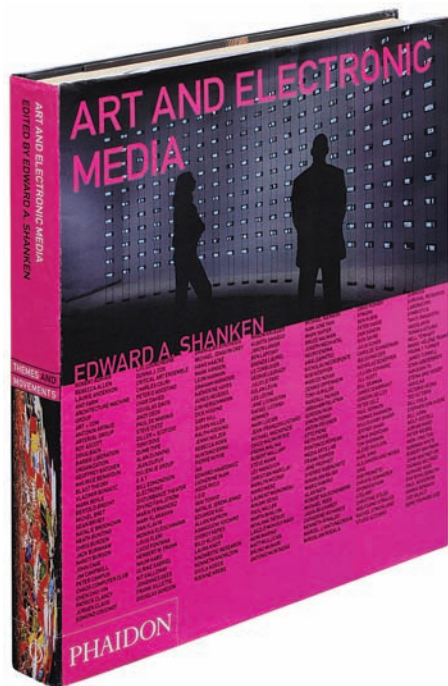
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ESPACES NÉOMÉDIATIQUES

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Q hard-bound, richly illustrated volume that is twice the size of a regular art manual, *Art and Electronic Media*, as the author confesses, presents itself as a canonical work¹. Edward A. Shanken states that his goal in writing this book has been “to enable the rich genealogy of art and technology in the twentieth century to be understood and *seen*, not just as a quirky and marginal activity, but as central to the history of art and visual culture since the early twentieth century”². The contextualization of art practices related to electronic media within the frame of the history of art is thus the main objective in Shanken’s research. This implies looking at the past rather than the future, underscoring the work of pioneers rather than outlining the most recent works at the time of going to press, and setting a reasoned structure rather than fantasizing with futuristic speculations. The all-encompassing, art historical approach of this book is to some extent unusual given the fact that the literature on this subject generally focuses on contemporary practice (from the 90s to the present day, allocating a few pages to the “pre-history” of these “new media”), or is made up of monographic essays by different authors, roughly distributed into broad categories. Yet the volume is not aimed at a media-savvy reader who looks for recent developments in the field, but instead intends to appeal the regular contemporary art audience. As with other titles in the *Themes and Movements* series by Phaidon, the book features a survey essay, a selection of works with illustrations and extended captions, and a documents section with edited critical writings and artist’s biographies. In the publisher’s words, the volumes in this series are “as exhaustive as a full-scale museum overview, presenting many of the most significant works of art associated with a particular tendency”³. This description, which notoriously mentions the most revered institution in the art world, speaks for itself and relates to the previously mentioned issue of the book presenting itself as canonical. Shanken already addresses this subject in his essay *Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method and Firing a Canon*, in which he states that “there is no clearly defined canon of electronic art”⁴. Therefore, he has taken the task of classifying and categoriz-

ing the different modes of art production related to the use of electronic media. The result is a series of six “thematic streams”, plus one chapter outlining the main exhibitions, institutions and communities in the field. The titles of these sections (just as the title of the book itself) refer to broad concepts that allow Shanken to place contemporary artworks alongside historical works from the beginning of the twentieth century under the same category, consciously avoiding popular terms such as “cybernetic”, “telematic” or “digital”, as well as the unfortunate term “new media”. In *Motion, Duration, Illumination*, the author draws a timeline that connects the early experiments in using movement and light by pioneers such as Naum Gabo or László Moholy-Nagy with the use of neon lights in Arte Povera and Conceptual Art, the Kinetic Art movement, and contemporary artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Under the title *Coded Form and Electronic Production*, Shanken reviews the conventional notion of originality and reproduction, from Pop Art to Fluxus and the first experiments with computer graphics, as well as the usually overlooked work of early computer algorists, and finally the emerging category of software art. *Charged Environments* reminds the reader that art has always been, to some extent, interactive, and that this attribute is not exclusive of electronic artworks. The works of John Cage and Wolf Vostell, among others, find their place in this section alongside Bill Viola and Tony Oursler, as well as Golan Levin’s software based interactive performances and Rubin and Hansen’s installation *Listening Post*, which generated some controversy after it received the Ars Electronica award for interactive art. The use of telecommunication technologies in art drives the section *Networks, Surveillance, Culture Jamming*, which connects the satellite transmission performances by artists such as Nam June Paik and Douglas Davis, Paul Sermon’s telematic artworks, net art pioneers, the activist group The Yes Men and Blast Theory’s locative media projects. In *Bodies, Surrogates and Emergent Systems*, the author refers to the Greek myth of Pygmalion to link works related to the body with those that deal with artificial life and with biological art. Hence, performance artists such as Chris Burden share this section with Marcel·lí Antúnez and Stelarc, as well as Eduardo Kac or the research group Symbiotica. Finally, *Simulations and Simulacra* is probably the section with most contemporary examples, due to the fact that it focuses on artworks dealing with computer-generated environments. From Myron Krueger’s pioneering work to the latest developments at the CAVE virtual reality environment, many examples are presented, although certain omissions, such as videogame based artworks, are notorious. *Art and Electronic Media* offers a broad perspective of the field and outlines its recent history, although it does not lead to a thesis or conclusion. Shanken’s intention, in fact, is to pave the way by setting up a categorization of the forms of art related to electronic media. Paraphrasing the title of his essay, one can say that a canon has been fired at the history of art. Time will tell if the current research will finally lead to a revision of art history that addresses the interactions between art, science and technology.

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Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences En_lloc (Now_here), Digital Culture (Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca) and the exhibitions *Metalandscapes* (Deichtorcenter Hamburg) and *FLOW* (CCA Andratx). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with *Rhizome*, *Artnodes*, *Vernissage TV* and *Furtherfield*. His articles have appeared in magazines such as *a::minima*, *Magazine du CIAC* and *Leonardo*. He is New Media Editor at *art.es* magazine. www.pauwaelder.com

NOTES

- Shanken, Edward A. “Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method and Firing a Canon”, in Grau, Oliver (ed.) *Mediaarthistories*. Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2007. 60.
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