Querying "the Immersive" in Time-based Media Art

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On November 13th, 2019, Professor Gloria Sutton, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art History and New Media at Northeastern University, gave a presentation titled P*attern Recognition: Durational Conditions of Contemporary Art* at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University as part of the lecture series *Topics in Time-based Media*. The lecture was based on the book of the same title, which she is currently working on.

Professor Sutton primed the audience by sketching out the proliferation of time-based media in museums' collections and exhibitions in the past decade. These include *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors* at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2017, *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts* at MoMA in 2018, *Olafur Eliasson: Reality Projector* at Marciano Art Foundation in 2018, and the upcoming survey of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Artworks by these artists are mostly described as "experiential" and "immersive". In academia, the predominating perspective also treats these artworks as the screen-based modality of the long-established spectatorship.

However, Professor Sutton pointed out there is much beyond. She used "pattern recognition," a term initially used in the field of data processing and machine learning, to refer to the cognitive process of how contemporary art has interpolated modernist image paradigms by critically adapting digital behaviors. She raised four groups of concepts for the audience to understand what shifts have taken place under such process: 1) interfaces, instead of mediums; 2) iteration, instead of originality; 3) a composite, rather than an assemblage; 4) compression, not abstraction.

In the lecture, Professor Sutton guided the audience to closely look at four pieces of work— *Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation* by Dara Birnbaum, *33 Questions per Minute* by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Reality Projector* by Olafur Eliasson and a series of rubbing pieces by Jennifer Bornstein — with a focus on their materiality. She thus problematized and mitigated against blindly associating digital artworks with "the instant, the immediate and the immersive."

Professor Sutton further criticized the term "immersive" for neglecting the influence of viewers' identities in the perception of artworks. She argued that the experience of time-based media art is never neutral or objective, but deeply conditioned by viewers' lived experiences of race, gender, class, and ability, just as other forms of art and in previous historical periods. Furthermore, immersion is not limited to either contemporary art or digital medium. While the large-scale projection of video artworks in architectural spaces did not appear until the 1990s, Professor Sutton regarded the 18th-century Sir John Soane's House as a precedent model, in which the architect deliberately deployed mirrors on wall panels to amplify neutral light. Meanwhile, non-digital contemporary artworks with architectural qualities, such as *Linienland* by Alicja Kwade, are also capable of providing an immersive environment.

One might see the way time-based media artworks depending on viewers' experience as a loss or removal from the original moment or source. Yet Professor Sutton found it demonstrates how contemporary conditions of the digital medium's circulation are deeply related to 19th-century photography techniques and pedagogical philosophy. She pointed out one of the inherent, unsolved conflicts in the discipline of art history. On the one hand, the work of art history calls for bodily experiencing artworks in real space and time. One the other hand, it is the flexibility of reproducing the art into photographs, books, and slides that governs how the art is conceived, practiced, and discussed. This dilemma attests to the discipline's longtime reliance on the virtualizing force of pictorial representation since the 19th century.

When being asked about the role of conservator in this context, quoting the head of conservator at MoMA, Professor Sutton responded that for time-based media, curating and exhibiting often means conserving. Collaborations between conservators and curators are even more important when artworks get recreated or fabricated for artists' retrospectives in museums. Conservators are frequently involved in the reconstruction of objects that are lost or even never fully realized, which is particularly challenging when translating or transferring the material choices that artists made while those materials are no longer available nowadays. In addition to thinking "what was it," Professor Sutton also urged future conservators and researchers to think about "where was it" and "when was it."

Besides this forthcoming book *Pattern Recognition*, Professor Sutton is also the author of *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek's Movie Drome and Expanded Cinema*, and has contributed to many art journals and exhibition catalogs. In general, her scholarship

investigates how time-based media and technological experimentation have altered the creation and reception of visual art since 1968.

Reference

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