

Introduction: *Trans New Media Art as Embodied Practice*

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ABSTRACT

Guest edited by Ace Lehner (University of Vermont) and Chelsea Thompto (Virginia Tech) this special issue of *Media-N* titled *Trans New Media as Embodied Practice* asks: How do trans artists engage generatively with new media? In what ways does lived trans experience inform artistic practices? How do trans new media practices diverge and intersect with queer practices? The articles, artist projects, interview, and review in this issue engage with the political and embodied experience of making and engaging with new media as a trans person.

Trans new media art today constitutes a vast and diverse field of creative engagements and scholarly methodologies. As an intervention, *Trans New Media as Embodied Practice* proposes sustained attention and study to be applied to this intersection and be attentive to the varied interventions, while highlighting that there is a concerted shift toward the prioritization of embodied experiences across trans methodologies. Within the purview of trans and new media as embodied practice are modes of being, doing, and thinking that upend established conceptions of identity and media art, modeling much-needed forms of making that move away from visually prioritized apprehension and towards somatic scholarship and corporeal creative interventions. Trans methodologies and trans creative practices provide frameworks for reimagining understandings and methods of studying visual culture and new media art.

An inclusive understanding of “trans” encompasses all gender identities that operate outside of or in opposition to colonial and binary logics, including non-binary, Indigenous, and other expansive gender formations. Likewise, trans new media practices include a rich and complex array of interventions and methodological insights. This special issue thus deploys the terms “trans” and “new media art” in their most expansive sense, while remaining grounded specific struggles and experiences often shared across the spectrum of trans-related identities.

At a moment in time when LGBTQ+ rights, particularly the rights of trans people, are being hotly and wrongfully contested globally, it is critical to attend to the progressive, expansive, and creative ways that transness is being continually redefined across embodiment, aesthetic practices, and politics within trans culture. At the time of writing this, there have been over 550

anti-trans bills proposed across 49 states in the U.S. in 2023 alone. This wave of legislation is part of an active and ongoing effort by right-aligned political actors to eradicate trans people from public life. To start by naming this context is a loaded choice because, while it is critical to underscore the political reality of trans people in the U.S. face, we are also more than what has been made of us politically. As the editors of this special issue, we are committing to the idea that while context is key to understanding much of the work we do (especially given that this journal's institutional home is in the U.S.), it also doesn't define all of who we are.

Though it must be stated plainly that trans visual culture is not a new phenomenon, it is also true that over the last several decades, there has been an unprecedented proliferation of trans representations, trans creative interventions, and innovations at the nexus of trans lives, trans scholarly methodologies, and trans creative practices. It is imperative to consider the temporal, global, and cultural shifts around transness in general, and how trans methods are deployed. This is especially important as, for recent decades now, there has been a growing cooption by the art world, mass media, and academia of assimilationist LGBTQIA+ identities, practices, and aesthetics. At the same time, the more innovative, methodologically rigorous, and intellectually provocative work is often under-considered.

Since the emergence of trans studies, trans methodologies have continued to be informed by trans embodied experiences. To this end, trans methodologies are inherently enmeshed with somatic and aesthetic perspectives. Nevertheless, it is vital to be direct and attend to the specificity of trans embodied practice as a particular intersection of creative and scholarly inquiry, for trans embodied methodologies offer unique insights with broad application. Similar in some ways to, and enmeshed and entwined with, feminist and queer theory, trans methods are imperative to dismantling reductive and essentialist ideologies about identity and representation. An enduring and problematic pseudo-logic pervasive in locations descended from the colonial project is the false equivalence of seeing and knowledge. Trans, as a rejection of the assigned sex/gender conflation bestowed on someone at birth which they are pressured to embody and embrace throughout life, debunks this fiction that one's identity is somehow apparent based on exterior attributes (especially those interpreted at birth). Moving in a direction that diverges from some of the overlapping interests of feminist and queer projects, trans methods' attention to embodiment does not seem to wax or wane; instead, embodiment is fundamental to trans creative and scholarly practices. For example, in her recent book *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*, Amelia Jones builds on queer and feminist theories to draw linkages between queerness and performativity writing:

Gender is performance. Queer (or genderqueer) is performative. Performance has genderqueer implications, putting (sexed) subjectivity and selfhood in motion. Art's performativity attaches itself to genderqueer subjects in a relational way. Queer artists tend towards performative methods.¹

By way of comparison to echo Jones's vital thinking and to tease out the overlaps and divergences between queer and trans, we suggest:

Trans is a creative and critical methodology rooted in trans embodied experience. Embodied experience has trans implications, putting (intersectional, temporally, geographically, and culturally) subjectivity and selfhood in context. Art's embodied

experience attaches itself to trans subjects in relational ways. Trans artists tend toward embodied methods.

The dominant binary perception of sex and gender prevalent in locations descended from the colonial project is not only a schema that exerts pressure on trans people but is part of a binary-based system of disenfranchisement based on visually discernible differences. As Susan Stryker wrote in the inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*:

Biopower constitutes transgender as a category that it surveils, splits, and sorts in order to move some trans bodies toward emergent possibilities for transgender normativity and citizenship while consigning others to decreased chances for life ... Biopower in this case is building on the work of Foucault and his formulation that critically interrogates the ways in which populations are shaped and controlled down to the very somatic bodily expression and pressured to conform in order to belong.²

The specific ways in which the logic of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy impacts trans experiences, trans creative practices, and trans methodologies necessarily grounds them in discrete ways to embodiment and, by extension, visibility; more specifically, media and mediation. Critical to the project of trans scholarship and creative praxis is the centering of embodiment in ways that do not allow for the normalizing of any one type of trans, this is done in part by keeping centered a critical perspective on the systems of regulation that maligned trans folks to begin with. As Jian Neo Chen writes in *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement*:

Trans of color cultures, social embodiments, and movement building contributed to the emergence of politicized and culturally mobilized U.S. transgender identity in the 1990s. Yet their experiences of interlocking oppression and cultural and political lives were sidelined by the more linear and one-dimensional gender identity-focused narratives of white-dominant transgender movements and communities.³

The marginalizing of trans of color perspectives and approaches in favor of reductive representations of transness continues. Trans art and artists continue to be sidelined, and trans representation is co-opted and exploited while reinforcing essentialist understandings of trans identity. Moreover, trans of color perspectives, research, and methodologies that critique and resist white supremacist, cis-supremacist, heteropatriarchal paradigms are continually marginalized, misidentified, and silenced.

When applied to the production and study of media art, trans embodied methodologies reveal nuanced and complex interventions to aesthetic, performative, and methodological perspectives. The robust interventions and revelations of applying trans embodied methodologies to the creation and study of new media art are primarily due to the complex interconnections of transness, media, and embodiment.

The articles in this issue consider this diverse range of trans new media art practices through explorations of video art, creative coding, video game development, performance, photography and more. They consider not only how trans artists are using new media to challenge traditional understandings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment, but also how the experience of being trans might have a fundamentally transformative impact on the way artists relate to a given type of

media. Taken then as a whole, the articles in this issue underscore the messy and murky distinction between trans-as-identity and trans-as-theory which has long been a challenge for those struggling to articulate what it means to be/make as a trans artist.

Artist projects like those by d'Andriole and Syzygy give us insights into specific artist practices and projects that reflect the artist's embodied experiences and sociopolitical investments. Larger-scope surveys like Gass's provide a framework for understanding trans influence in game development. Work like that of Benavides and Kang helps us contextualize trans new media practices across other overlapping and intertwined disciplines. While the work of Duffy and acierto as well as that of Gates, attend to the more specific and technical nuances of new media, from creative code to GPS.

Taken together, the work in this volume should be understood as starting points for larger conversations as the fields of trans studies and new media are rapidly changing and growing and are in fact demonstrably different at the time of writing this compared to when the call for papers was proposed and circulated. We the editors hope that this issue, especially given its open and digital format, brings more people into the conversation and shines new light on those who have been contributing to the field for some time.

ENDNOTES

1. Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London: Routledge, 2021), 1.
2. Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2398540>.
3. Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement*, Anima: Critical Race Studies Otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 7.

AUTHOR BIOS

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