Media Art of Lee Lee-Nam

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Lee Lee-Nam calls himself a "new media artist." But what does this mean exactly? In the 1990s, the term "new media art" was used in the U.S, Europe and Japan to refer to art works that used a computer. And to use a computer meant to use algorithms – sets of instructions organized into a computer program. These instructions allowed a computer to change what is displayed on the screen, control other attached devices, sense the environment, and "interact" with the visitors and the surrounding space. The examples of 1990s new media art were artists' web sites, interactive narratives presented on CD-ROMs, and interactive installations. But in the same time, this same term "new media art" was used in Eastern Europe and in South America to refer to video art – because video was only becoming available to many artists in these places.

Today, it is hard to find cultural artifacts or experiences that don't depend on computers for their creation, publishing, and reception. For example, music, architecture and space design, product design, cinema and animation are created with software tools. And video games, millions of apps for mobile devices, web sites, and images and video shared by hundreds of millions of people on social media networks would not even exist without servers, mobile devices, internet, WIFI, and software that links it all together.

So what qualifies a person today to be a "new media artist," or simply a "media artist"? Using computers in some way (for example, the way Lee Lee-Nam is using digital animation in many of his works) is obviously not enough. After all, people started to create art works with computers already in the 1950s – before other new forms of art that we now take for granted (installation, performance, site-specificity) have developed. Thus, computer art is as old as other post World War II art forms, and this does not qualify it as the latest thing.

I do think that Lee Lee-Nam is indeed a (new) media artist but in another deeper sense. He is not necessarily using latest media technologies such as smart phones, optical super-fast networks, or open source hardware. In fact, sometimes his use of media technologies can be read as nostalgic. For example, instead of the latest flat 4K Samsung TV, Christ (in *Why Crist carries TV*, 2014) is carrying an old big TV set – the kind of TV Lee Lee-Nam perhaps enjoyed as a teenager. The reason Lee is a media artist is because his works are reflections on the *history of media* and the representational and aesthetic possibilities of the media technologies used by humans. Like a proper media historian (or media archeologist), he often uses a comparative method, juxtaposing two or more

media together so they can confront each other, reveal to us what they can and can't do, exchange properties, or enter in other type of relationship.

These juxtapositions are not about "old media" and "new media," or "analog" and "digital," or "sculpture" and "animation." Such binary oppositions are never helpful, and they don't apply to Lee's art. Instead, we should attend to the fact that he is referencing many different media materials. These materials have their own histories, connected to power, wars, religions, exploitation of natural resources, human competition, misery, suffering and ecstasy. And these histories and their links get activated in Lee's media art.

For example, consider *New Water Lily-2* (2007). The delicate animation is superimposed on the background image that refers to one of 250 oil paintings of lilies created by Claude Monet in his garden during last thirty years of his life. In these paintings Monet can be said to explore the medium of oil paint to its fullest, using it to blend the water, the reflections and the flowers into a single flow of paint on canvas. The added delicate digital animation makes this painterly flow even less material, more like light and less like dried paint on canvas. But we should also remember that Monet was suffering from failing eyesight and other health issues as he was painting the water lilies, and this is why in these paintings the oil medium is no longer under control by the artist, but acquires its own life. In other words, only because the creator is no longer in control, the medium can reveal himself. The liberation of painting medium was thus accompanied by real human pain and illness.

We should also recall that like other French Impressionists, Monet was earlier strongly influenced by Japanese art prints. The flatness of space, the elegant and complex lines, the asymmetry of compositions, the traces of a brush dipped in ink, the lack of one-point perspective, the focus on motion, the recreation of mood one may feel in a landscape – all these characteristics of traditional painting from Korea, China and Japan had direct effect on Impressionist's visual language, and later modern Western art developed out of this language.

The images of such historical Asian paintings frequently appear in Lee's works. Moved from their original material supports into the electronic screens where colors are created by light, these paintings now shine and speak to us with a new strength and intensity. This first transformation, from paper or silk to the electronic screen, is important in itself. It already sets up a dialog between different media technologies.

Lee Lee-Nam typically adds animated elements to these classical paintings – as, for example, in *BOOK–Landscape*[1]. This creates a real paradox. Classical Chinese or Korean artists developed sophisticated techniques to convey motion and the sense of constant change in their paintings. The shapes of hills and mountains disappearing into the flat backgrounds; deliberately visible brushstrokes; even the choice of particular landscape details over others subjects - all this worked to "animate" a still image. So if these paintings are already kind of animations, why should a contemporary artist add literal animation to them?

I believe that one role of these superimposed animation is to remind us that classical Asian paintings that originally represented the flow of life (and thus can be said to act in their time as computer animation does today) became museum objects, guarded by glass, guards and security systems. They have also become prisoners of the art market, and the system of galleries, museums and collectors. Lee's playful and humorous animations act to make these paintings flow and move again, while they continue to be imprisoned. (Indeed, in *BOOK–Landscape* the two classical paintings are shown as reproductions in art auction catalog).

As in some other artist's works, in *BOOK–Landscape* what gets animated are only small distinct elements rather than the painting surface as a whole (for the example of the latter, see *Dreamscape 1*[2]) . Tiny figures travel across one painting, and birds fly across both of them. Such animation limited to small figures recall a variety of 19th century pre-cinematic media technologies, including a stroboscope, a phenakistoscope, a zoopraxiscope, a zoetrope and many others. Similar to what we see in Lee's videos with animated details added to classical paintings, these technologies could only create one or a few animated figures (sometimes appearing against a full colorful background).

I hope that my analysis explains that the artworks of Lee Lee-Nam create dialogs between many different historical and contemporary media technologies, and their cultural histories. And this is why he is indeed a media artist – as opposed to, for example, a "painter" who is only having a dialog with the history of painting, or a sculptor who only addresses history of sculpture. Western oil painting and Asian ink painting, sculpture, cinema and TV, metal, water, light, electricity – these are just some of the media one encounters in Lee's art. So when you are enjoying his works, don't try to reduce them to any binary opposition, but instead try consider all the different worlds they bring together.

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[1] http://www.seditionart.com/lee_lee_nam/book-landscape.
[2] http://www.seditionart.com/lee_lee_nam/dreamscape_1.