

# State of Media Art, In wake of COVID-19

Khayal Trivedi

## Abstract

With this essay I would like to analyse the state of media art in light of the current pandemic caused by COVID-19, with a post-phenomenological lens. Theories of Ihde, Merleau-Ponty and thoughts of Peter-Paul Verbeek shall help me build the case in concluding that the current crisis has accelerated the growing complexities of human and technology relations. Even though the institutions and cultural sector as a whole would suffer major economic losses, the potential for media art will grow many folds during and post the crisis because of these increased complexities.

I shall do so by first positioning media art in perspective of post-phenomenological studies and elaborating upon the field being an exploratory artistic inquiry of human-technology relation. Media art in this way can be very well called a tool of post-phenomenology. Then I will briefly elaborate the current state of media arts, its infrastructure, challenges and market. Before explaining the COVID-19 crisis and its implications of media art, it is worth mentioning the blurring boundaries between human, technology and world and how these boundaries are all the more blur during this crisis. With the help of few case studies and initiatives I will then discuss the potential of media art and opportunities for the sector. A further analysis of methods of mediation and curation of human-technology-world relations can be done and are required, but they will remain outside the scope of the essay for now. The essay shall reflect only upon the state of media art prior to crisis, and the push it will receive during and post the crisis keeping few examples in mind that have been initiated. I shall conclude the essay by highlighting the importance of Postphenomenological studies in media art and also its limitation of not being able to provide solutions for its market and economy. That should be looked for, elsewhere. The research task that I've taken for this essay deserves a long and detailed thesis but I wanted to initiate working in this direction by analysing the ongoing global crisis.

## **Positioning Media Art in perspective of Post-phenomenology**

Media art as a term or a genre is a more recently introduced category to encompass all forms of contemporary arts that either involves technology or media which paves way for the artwork or uses these technologies as an integral part of the very language of the art. This genre includes a broad spectrum of art forms that range from 19<sup>th</sup> century to the current times. One of the early forms was photography and sound art, especially musique concrete from the 1920s which aimed at capturing raw industrial sounds (sounds of technology). The acceleration of technological advancement during the world wars eventually led to many developments in film and communication industries. This period was carefully analysed and critiqued by phenomenologists like Heidegger who was trying to get away from the dualism of the modernity. The technical advancements gave way for video art and electronic music. Glitch art was a response to the errors or flaws of the technology as it was evolving. By 80s and 90s, the gaming industry boomed with the onset of graphics, which too, gave us many renowned media artists. The birth of internet (Web 1.0) opened up a huge field of experimentation for (net) artists. Meanwhile the gaming and film industry somewhere merges to give way for Virtual Reality, the idea of which was in existence since a while but it materialised quite recently. Now the push of the market is towards Augmented reality, AI, and Machine learning, in whose response artists are making AR works, practicing algorithmic art, interactions with AI etc.

It is important to be cognizant of the very premise on which media art is fundamentally based. Media art is often either exploring the technology (glitch, music concrete) or becomes an important tool in the language of the art form (video, VR, AR). Media art constantly explores the human-technology-world relation which is the very foundation of post-phenomenology, a step away from phenomenology that carried a romanticism in being away from technology.

Human's relation with technology is more complex today than it ever was. The push of the market was always towards gaining accessibility of tools, gadgets and software to arguably 'enhance' the experience of daily life. It is difficult to separate technology from humans today. Andrew Feenberg

argues that 'Technology is as natural to human beings as language and culture. We are homo-technologicius by our very nature' (Feenberg 2015, 230). In this complex mesh of relations where boundaries of subject and object have blurred, incorporating science and technology studies in philosophy and art becomes essential and crucial. This was the step taken forth by post-phenomenologists, especially Ihde who put forward the framework for it. The human-world relation typically is a human-technology-world relation (Ihde 1990). Our relation with technology shape our experiences. Technologies are not opposed to human existence; they are its very medium. (Verbeek and Rosenberger 2015, 13). The following phrases from the book Postphenomenological investigations set the tone of the analysis of the paper.

Postphenomenology always takes the study of human-technology relations as its starting point. In order to understand a technology or a technological development,

Postphenomenology always analyses the character of the relation human beings have with this technology and the ways in which it organizes relations between human beings and the world. (Verbeek and Rosenberger 2015, 13).

Post-phenomenology can be therefore summarised as the study of human-technology-world relations, in essence it becomes philosophy of this relation and from this relation. Media Art as a language of artistic creation deals with different facets of human-technology-world relation and therefore is set in the same premise. Be it in any of its various forms, it is a human's attempt to not just understand the tools and the technologies available but also use it as a language to either create something or explore the very language itself in its different facets. Media art stands as a response to the technologies, in what they or are capable of, away from the capitalistic market driven economy. And from that perspective media art itself can be argued as a tool of post-phenomenological creative research of the very environment we're living in and must be valued for its exploratory methodology in its very nature.

## **Current State of Media Art: Challenges, Infrastructure and Market**

Being an evolving field at the intersection of art, science and technology, media art does face a lot of challenges. The state of Media Art, as a field or genre today, can be analysed by keeping in mind many aspects of it: Artists that are engaging in this medium and their perspective, art market around it, festivals and institutions, researchers and research opportunities available, higher education programs expanding upon this field, and the audience. Critical reflection upon the state of the field with all these aspects in mind demands a sincere and long research. But for the scope of this essay, a brief analysis of the whole spectrum shows how the field is still limited to few countries, institutions and limited audiences for many reasons.

Media art is evidently Eurocentric, since it is an outcome of a long standing evolution of philosophy and practice since the enlightenment. There are many well-established festivals like Transmediale, ARS Electronica, Biennale des arts numeriques etc. and significant and powerful institutions like ZKM, Culturespaces, Paris 104, TeamLab etc., spread out in Europe, US, oriental countries and some Latin American countries. But these institutions or artists are yet to touch the markets of South Asia, Africa, mainland China.

Elaborating from the perspective of the market in India, the term Media Art doesn't really exist. Contemporary artists do experiment with science, technology and art but do not call themselves as Media artists. That term is yet to arrive in the country or region. In South Asia there is a dearth of institutions or universities offering opportunities or courses at this intersection, whereas Europe still has those institutions supporting the research and students.

Another major challenge being the access to technologies to experiment upon. The virtual reality glasses and gadgets are expensive to begin with, 'Media Labs' for universities is a huge investment which they often refrain from doing, thus experimenting with new technologies becomes difficult and costly. Besides, even the market of new media art is difficult for various reasons. A lot of the artwork is on internet and cannot be really sold, so how do artists earn money apart from projects that are

commissioned. Another difficulty that galleries and museums face is in exhibiting, preserving and archiving new media works. Works like that of Nam June Paik who uses old televisions and equipment are extremely complicated to exhibit since technologies become obsolete in every few years and to preserve and ensure its functioning in 50 years is a challenge for all. Patricia Falcao's (from TATE) intervention last year in Austria was quite revealing in this regard.

It is also important to elaborate upon the reach of media art to a global audience, since the phenomena of technology is global as well. In past decade the accessibility to internet and smartphones, has allowed companies like Facebook and Google to reach almost every corner of the globe, even the less privileged. Humans are more virtually connected today than they ever were, all through technologies that have developed in past few decades. This opens up a huge audience for artists especially media artists to reach and therefore a huge potential for media art to progress. But it has to find ways to break through the bubble and reach out to people who are absorbed in the market run by tech corporations. By this it does not mean that media art(ists) stand(s) in competition with the tech corporations. Companies like Google are pushing forth media art with projects like Google Arts and Culture project and Experiments with Google. What needs to be pushed forth from all sectors, be it corporates, institutions, cultural centres, festivals and artists is the approach of experimentation towards technology in order to explore the human-technology-world relation across the borders to bring new perspectives, which is challenging.

### **Human-Technology-World: Blurring Boundaries**

Since the époque of Heidegger and the classical phenomenologists who tried to shift away from dualism of modernity, human systems, especially after the technological revolution in late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, have been blurring the boundary of subject-object. Philosophers like Bruno Latour with his Actor-Network theory (1980), and the concept of multistability that refers to the dynamics and ambiguity of human's relation with technology further blurs these lines. As Ihde puts it,

“No technology is ‘one thing,’ nor is it incapable of belonging to multiple contexts” (Ihde, *Technology and Prognostic Predicaments* 1999, 47). And therefore keeping these theories in context, a sharp distinction between the virtual and real world wouldn’t be appropriate. Humans being’s relationship with world and technology aren’t two distinct, non-overlapping units. But as Ihde puts it, there are relations of embodiment (human-technology → world), Hermeneutic relations (human → technology-world), Alterity relations (human → technology(world)), and Background relations (human (technology/world)). (Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld* 1990). Ihde reflected upon the complexity of human-technology relations in this seminal work, *Technology and Lifeworld*.

Similarly, even Merleau Ponty, in his later works elaborated upon the concept of ‘flesh’ and ‘umwelt’ which is very relevant in this context. He presented the idea of body as a measure for the world and how body is technologized and technologies are embodied and how technology mediates us as we transform them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1973; 2003; 2011).

Therefore, it can be pointed out that to some extent majority of the humans today who have the privilege to stay connected to the technologies, tools and gadgets be it from a radio, to television, to smartphone, internet and so on and so forth, find themselves in an interesting dynamic flesh in this technological world. And the lines between the virtual world and physical for an individual today are increasingly blurring and confusing as effects of one realm transfer to the other, physical leading to virtual and virtual transforming physical. These relations have transformed many fields from philosophy, sciences, architecture, design, art, economy, market etc. All of this is in a way, scope of post-phenomenology and therefore media art.

## **Crisis: COVID-19 and its implications on Media art**

The ongoing crisis caused by the pandemic, COVID-19, has shut down many countries and have brought the biggest economies of the world as well as the world economy to an almost unpredictable stage. As more and more nations are joining the list of 'lockdown' countries, people's movements are restricted not just by air now but even on land. Increasingly drastic measures are being taken to achieve more social (physical) distancing to reduce the spread of the virus. In wake of no vaccine for the virus, the only measure that the countries can take is breaking the chain of infection by keeping people from gathering. Schools and universities have shut in most affected countries, business and private companies are urged to send their employees back home, only the essential industries like healthcare, security, media and food are running. In such a situation an individual whose physical movements are restricted and is asked to stay isolated or quarantined for on an average 3-5 weeks, will rely more on the technologies it has. Video conferencing to continue work is being encouraged, schools and universities are holding classes through group video conferencing, distance learning is being enforced, people are consuming more internet bandwidth than before either for work or for leisure purposes. A report by Scott Moritz published by Bloomberg, shows that Covid-19 may strain the internet services especially home connections.<sup>1</sup>

But one of the biggest losses because of this crisis would be that of the art and culture sector, which is anyways running on low budgets except few countries or institutions specifically. This sector earns its revenues majorly from tourism, museum/exhibition visits, and art sale, which has been completely disrupted for at least 6 months from now: a peak season for the European market. Louise Steiwer, a renowned art critic interviewed key players of Danish art world to assess the situation which showed that all art institutions large and small, from National Gallery of Denmark, Louisiana Museum, to Kunsthal Aarhus are facing major losses, effect of which will be felt for years to come<sup>2</sup>. Festivals, art

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-06/empty-offices-full-homes-covid-19-might-strain-the-internet>

<sup>2</sup> <https://kunstkritikk.no/shadows-loom-over-the-danish-art-world/>

fairs, museums, residencies, exhibitions have closed or cancelled because of this blow. San Francisco Art Institute plans its closing after almost 150 years, as the Coronavirus sent the Bay area on lockdown<sup>3</sup>.

However, as institutions are forced to send their employees home and close their centres, there are attempts to capture the market online with virtual exhibitions, curated stories, live interaction and performances, and even exhibitions on social media platforms. These initiatives are led not just by institutions but even artists and independent curators.

### **Initiatives in response to the crisis**

As the physical movements of people are restricted to their houses, their dependency on tools and technologies will increase. Their presence on virtual networks shall also increase through smartphones, tablets, and computers. The physicality will be replaced by the virtual during this period of crisis which opens up a potential audience for market to capture upon. Many artists, institutions, curators, and tech corporations have responded to this crisis by following projects which can be a major push for media arts and media artists as human-technology-world relations intertwine further.

In Italy, in one of the hardest hit regions during this pandemic, curator Giada Pellicari began a movement #ArtistsinQuarantine. She invited 12 artists who live in the red areas (worst hit) to present, in some cases, new artworks responding to the crisis and the medium (Instagram). These works would go on sale, online. As Giada shares, this project highlights the fragility and the vulnerability of art community during this time as all their projects, residencies, grants, exhibition stands cancelled for the foreseeable future. The artists range from digital and new media artists to classical forms, pushing sometimes artists to adapt to digital mediums<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, US based curator Barbara Pollack began an

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/arts/design/san-francisco-art-institute-coronavirus.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-museums-curators-artists-find-innovative-solutions-showing-art-pandemic>

exhibition on the web, Art at a time like this, with intentions of purely initiating dialogue about art during this crisis. The exhibition will grow with time as more artists will be added. The end of the exhibition could be as long as this crisis goes on, or maybe beyond, says Barbara<sup>5</sup>. A Portuguese artists collective “wr3ad1ng d1g1t5”, even before the declaration of pandemic by WHO, announced a call for e-mail art/ art by e-mail with the project titled Art in Quarantine. This project is aimed at being a unique historical archive of the current times and elaborating upon the field of art and health. All contributions will be hosted in their digital gallery. In 40 days, about 105 entries have been received from around the world of different genres from photographs, collage, illustration etc.<sup>6</sup>. Another such archival project of the quarantine times is an open google doc which asks people about their experiences in quarantine and then makes a comic like catalogue about it. All the collected information will stay anonymous as they are trying to gather experiences, feelings, hobbies etc<sup>7</sup>.

As the physical gatherings and live performances have been cancelled across countries, Alipore Post, an online weekly newsletter from India, that sends updates on arts, culture and music, planned a festival online on Instagram. The curator under the pseudo-name ‘woohoochild’ on Instagram, connected with all the people that inspired her and asked them to do either a live conference, workshop or performance. The Instagram portal of Alipore Post went live for 13 hours straight, engaging audiences live with questions and comments.<sup>8</sup>

Institutions that are forced to shut their physical centres are also employing different techniques to keep their audiences and community engaged. The Galleria Uffizi in Florence which is physically closed due to the coronavirus currently, made use of the platform, Google Arts and Culture, and initiated virtual tours of the museum that will be recorded and released in coming months. The senior director

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<sup>5</sup> <https://artatatimelikethis.com/about>

<sup>6</sup> <http://wreading-digits.com/art-in-quarantine/>

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([https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeiYlJn7Fpcm794UydWNmXpFCgATiAHQz9F5kUr\\_4S6hbrCDg/viewform?fbclid=IwAR2qW7FnMuDFvRrxhKww2y4IvDZeo1V-UcCUMs7tgEAGchhzqL2NSHb-kk](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeiYlJn7Fpcm794UydWNmXpFCgATiAHQz9F5kUr_4S6hbrCDg/viewform?fbclid=IwAR2qW7FnMuDFvRrxhKww2y4IvDZeo1V-UcCUMs7tgEAGchhzqL2NSHb-kk))

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/B9-u\\_8sJCFP/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B9-u_8sJCFP/)

of the museum, Eike Schmidt, in their first video, walks virtual audience through the galleries and says that “Although the museums have closed, art and culture does not stop”<sup>9</sup>.

Meanwhile the tech corporations and online streaming services are also taking advantage of people being home by offering free access to their services for a period of time. Adobe and Unity already announced free access to their premium services for three months<sup>10</sup>. Unity also began tutorials for newcomers to learn the software and encourage people to design environments and code<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, INA, ‘Institut national de l’audiovisuel’, launched its streaming platform Madelen with more than 13000 archives of all genres, free of cost for its first 3 months during this crisis<sup>12</sup>. Evidently popular film streaming platforms like Mubi have also initiated such schemes to keep people engaged in their homes.

### **Potential for Media Arts**

As all these initiatives are picking up, the scope of media art as well as its potential audience also increases. A month or more of isolation and dependency on technological devices, mainly internet, shall certainly push the market more towards adapting to such crisis periods. Institutions, uniquely cultural institutions that weren’t equipped with the infrastructure to make use of the online audience will adapt to it. Projects like Google Arts have been existing since years but they will get more push. The concept of online and virtual exhibition isn’t new, but the crisis has forced people to re-evaluate the need of it. COVID-19 was first of its kind of crisis during the technology driven post-internet era and most probably will not be the last one as our world is increasingly interconnected. In such a scenario, this time of isolation will force artists to rethink their art and strategy. Adobe’s and Unity’s

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-museums-curators-artists-find-innovative-solutions-showing-art-pandemic>

<sup>10</sup> <https://petapixel.com/2020/03/18/adobe-is-giving-everyone-2-months-of-free-creative-cloud-heres-how-to-get-it/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://learn.unity.com/project/week-1-getting-started-march-23-march-27?courseId=5e7282d3edbc2a0be7d6c2e7>

<sup>12</sup> <https://madelen.ina.fr/>

move to make their software more accessible to people will push individuals towards content creation. Initiatives like Art in quarantine, will push artists to adapt to digital technologies if they are not dealing with it. Institutions will have to go digital to survive. The crisis has accelerated our dependency on digital technologies greatly to the extent that even classical art forms would need a digital medium to promote itself because human is increasingly technologicous. It is difficult to separate the technology from humans and humans from technology. It is also difficult to draw boundaries between the both and the world. Precisely where the notion of flesh of Merleau Ponty can be used.

In the essay *Visible and Invisible*, Merleau Ponty uses the term flesh to completely move away from subject-object dichotomy. Flesh is neither substance nor consciousness; rather, it is “the formative medium of the object and the subject” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 147). Extending the concept of flesh to the concept of measuring body, as introduced by authors of the essay *Thinking Technology with Merleau Ponty*, Aud Sissel Hoel and Annamaria Carusi, the human, technology and world are a system, and flesh is the dynamic relation between them that encompasses all. (Carusi and Hoel 2015) An individual surfing on the internet through a virtual exhibition, is in constant relation with the technological device and the internet that is allowing the user to experience a digital representation of an actual exhibition. In this dynamic flesh, the technology at disposal shapes the user’s experience of art. Further complexity can be added by carefully curating art for virtual audiences, where the art itself is made keeping in mind the post-phenomenological analysis of the humans-technology-world system, for the audiences. Virtual mediation of content and art also influences the physical realm of the user as it affects the user and his experience. For example, the constant media attention on Covid-19 and the growing number of cases with numerous interactive graphs and predictions of the cases leads to an anxiety and panic in people isolated in their rooms but are connected to the world through these digital representation of physical changes. It is precisely why it becomes crucial to understand the human-technology relations (post-phenomenology) and consciously curate and mediate media art especially virtually to transform human experiences for better – if that is the intention.

Each of the initiatives aforementioned amidst this crisis attempts to push the state of media art in a better position as institutions suffer an economic loss in coming months or years. #ArtistsinQuarantine in Italy by Giada, pushes artists to adapt to the digital technologies and attempts to create a virtual audience in hopes of some art sales. Art in quarantine project from Portugal promotes e-mail art and builds an archive of quarantine experiences captured in these times. Alipore Post attempts to bring live interaction or performance digitally, where both artists and audiences are restricted to their rooms yet can engage with each other. This, in no way, is a replacement of physical events but shows the potential of digital mediums. And as more and more institutions adapt these methods, the market will also push the tech corporations making these digital platforms to adapt to these new methods of virtual engagement – technologies changing human behaviour and humans transforming technologies. A reference to the concept of Umwelt by Jakob Von Uexkull, who stressed on the dynamic interaction between organisms and its environment, becomes important here. Environment creating organism and organism transforming environment. Merleau Ponty was deeply inspired by this concept. (Carusi and Hoel 2015)

Theories of Ihde and his analysis of different relations between human, technology and world, and theories of Merleau Ponty and his brief analysis in his later works about how body is technologized and technologies are embodied along with how technologies transform our experience of the world and how we transform the technologies are very relevant in today's context and stand valid. But how to use this growing interdependency between technology and humans to further explore art amidst this, should be the intention of media artists and falls out of the scope of post-phenomenology.

## **Conclusion and limitation**

The crisis shows us that we need media art and methods to adapt to new media to reach the growing audience and break through the art network's bubble. Media art has the potential to break the elitism of art circles, possible greatly because of the blurring boundary between what is human and what is technology. Post-phenomenology studies therefore come at the centre of media arts. The market and current crisis is pushing human towards the technology, it in fact has actually accelerated the process, to the point that at the end of this we will be more interwoven with each other (technology). Companies, institutions, economy, markets shall adapt and preview such scenarios and thus the relevance of media art and media artists is all the more. Post this essay, it would be worth thinking about methods and spheres of mediation to utilise this potential. Theories of Verbeek as well as independent attempts of several artists and curators become key inspirations for its analysis.

Post-phenomenological theories certainly give the premise to analyse human-technology relations and media arts but do not necessarily give solutions for its economy or reach. It becomes an important way of looking or making media art but doesn't answer its survival. And precisely why attention should be brought to initiatives and projects mentioned in this case study as attempts for the survival of the field and the artists. New strategies would have to be devised for the survival of the economy of media arts like the attempts of the Italian curator (which isn't ideal but is an attempt), but I'm certain that since there is a growing demand, solutions and sustainable systems shall also arise.

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