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Handling New Media
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Assignment 1

Distinctive Characteristics of Old and New Media:
Richard Serra's Boomerang and Chris Marker's Immemory

In Richard Serra's work from 1974, *Boomerang*, Nancy Holt sits and is videotaped hearing herself speak through a delay. She discusses the effect of this electronic delay on her own thinking and speaking in the video, as the delay occurs. Video, what Lev Manovich describes as an "old" media, "sampling the frame along a vertical dimension." The interesting point to this work is that it is documenting a media being synthesized and the effect it has on a listener. But importantly, and distinct from Chris Marker's 1997 CD-ROM work, and "new media," is its fixity on a magnetic tape, it is missing "variability."

This video is interesting to consider in terms of Manovich's idea of the "myth of interactivity," because it is an example of an old media work. Manovich writes about new media, "interactive media asks us to click on a highlighted sentence to go to another sentence... we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations."¹ So even though Marker's new media work exists with a million different variables, it is still similar to Serra's work in that the work is limited in its interactivity on the level of the object of the work.

In his talk titled "Net.art in the Age of Digital Reproduction," David Ross describes early video art as questioning the role of broadcast television, following Brecht's conception of the inherently one-sidedness to any form of broadcast. So video

¹ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. "What is New Media?" Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press (2001) p. 61.

art such as Serra's work is attempting to look at that idea of broadcast in a fixed form, and is not a "variable" work. Video had the capability to become something of an everyman's medium, divorced from industry standards. Cheaply made, David Ross notes that "video art was seen as a medium with radical potential."

Manovich notes, "numerous copies could be run off the master, and, in perfect correspondence with the logic of an industrial society, they were all identical." However, we see that even though Chris Marker's work contains a limited number of hyperlinks, and really only the semblance of interactivity, it is still a "variable" work. This distinction between a variable and an interactive work is important for Manovich's distinction between "new media" and "old media." Old media can still be "interactive" in the sense that the audience can interpret a work in any number of different ways, but it is not a "variable" work. In variable works, "a new media object gives rise to many different versions." Manovich continues, "meaning of the work lies not in its material object, a set beginning and end point, but as data that can be sent through wires at the speed of light."

Even though Marker's work is not "net.art," in that it is not online, David Ross' idea of new media implicit in this talk about net.art still applies. Particularly, his idea that art that is on the internet "authority shifts between reader and writer." In *Immemory*, the viewer opens the CD-ROM and is presented with seven different options, labeled with hyperlinks such as "museum," "war," and so on. The user can then follow these links to then more links and sequences of images, all in an inset frame on the computer monitor. Each distinct color of the mouse pointer indicates a different time zone the work or documented location is in. Each page has a number of different sets of images and text hyperlinked to click and discover a whole new area of the enormous "map" Marker has

put together in *Immemory*. So the sequence and what the viewer of the CD-ROM happens to discover is completely unique each time the viewer, or at least each different viewer “Enters the Memory,” as the main “entry” hyperlink to the work indicates. But in thinking about Ross’ idea, the authority shifts again when the work becomes an artifact to be preserved—because of this shift in authorship, the question becomes, what is there to preserve? How do we preserve a work that has multiple authors and a (seemingly, at least) endless amount of possible variables to the object of the work?

The similarities in these two works are also numerous. Both contain “samples.” In the case of Serra’s work, samples are “sampling the frame along the vertical dimension (scanlines)”² While in Marker’s case, as in much of digital art, it relies on “lossy compression” to be readable on a consumer’s computer. So much of the image information represented is lost in compression. Serra’s work also requires certain specific playback machine in order to be viewed, as does Marker’s work, which is only playable on a Macintosh computer with an operating system 9.

² Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. “What is New Media?” Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press (2001) p. 28.