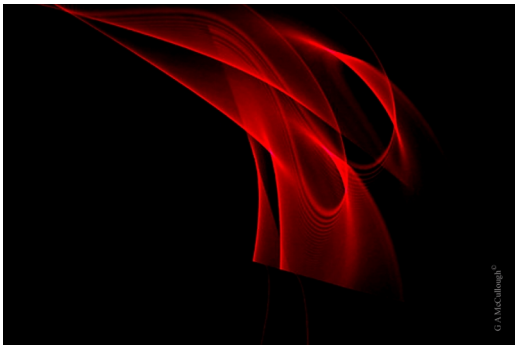

Red Projections 22 Red laser Drawing
GAMcCullough

Ecotonal Transitions within the Arterroir

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John Berger describes Max Raphael's theory of art as "an interplay, an equation of three factors: the artist, the world and the means of figuration."[1] This collaboration is the basis of art. Raphael's *interplay* as the genesis of the arts is much like wine making's concept of terroir, where the interdependent play of viticulture, time, geography and technology are crucial for the vintages profile. So too in art, we may speak of an **Arterroir**.

The term *Arterroir* circumscribes the vigorous ecology through which art emerges, circulates, and acquires meaning via the continuous synergy of artists, media, institutions, audiences, technologies, histories, and cultural systems. It embraces the inter-dependency of the artist and art world zones that give rise to meaningful expression of any art piece.

In this codependency, the amount of influence or distortion that one zone may exert upon another is never fixed and constantly responds to all the divergent forces within the arterroir's ecosystem. How this friction and pressure is exerted is typically expressed within the ecotones which border between each abutting zone.

Ecotones may be described as the intermediary area between at least two coherent zones. As an example, in nature, consider the edge of the meadow and the forest's treeline. That boundary, or ecotone, is where most evolutionary pressures are exerted, and new opportunities occur.[2] These ecotones between the stable zones act as transitional spaces. They often are productive zones of instability where transformation occurs. This is vital and beneficial when they allow interchange between the stable systems, yet they may become detrimental if they destabilize the existing coherent systems. This is as true in nature as in art.

Roland Barthes gravitates around these concurrent art zone pressures in prescribing meaning as not being anchored to original intention, but instead mediated through readers, systems, and culture.[3] This derived meaning is the result of the collaborative influence of the arterroir's ecotones which reside between these coherent systems. One of the most direct ways the artist can encourage and nurture this ecotone agency is by giving tangible form to concepts.

What that form takes is critical. As Marshall McLuhan was apt to demonstrate, media technologies (form) reshape human perception regardless of the user's conscious intention.[4] As the structure of a medium changes, so the form of mediation has already transformed the concept before the user's deliberate usage even begins. The medium's physicality, and hence our interaction with it, changes the nature of the relationship between observer and subject.

Key is that each media privileges different properties. What is privileged is not arbitrary. Each physicality will shift and drift the concept toward the logic of the medium, where they will undergo the selective pressures of their new medium. Objectifying a concept thus transforms it into something ecotonal: a transitional, semi-autonomous zone where meanings interact, mutate, compete, and propagate beyond the intentions of their originators.

The concept in effect, now lives between systems: between author and audience; between the original and the derivative; between the symbol and reality; between institution and individual; between memory and reinterpretation.

Different media give rise to different ontological encounters with the subject. Hence a chosen media does not merely represent a thing differently; it partly determines what kind of thing the subject becomes in experience. The medium changes the nature of the relationship between observer and subject. This changed relationship is not just a different interpretation; the encounter itself has changed.

Walter Benjamin explores how material form changes how we view concepts anew via temporality,

accessibility, aura, authority, reproducibility, and embodiment.[5] Hence art is a collaboration between artist, subject, medium, audience, historical moment, technological conditions, and institutional framing. Each "participant" in the arterroir, alters the others via their interactions.

To emphasize, the subject has become ontologically reconfigured. Each medium reorganizes our relation through attention, scale, temporality, emotional relation, symbolic significance, and even sensory hierarchy. Each medium reveals and conceals different dimensions of being.

To illustrate how each media equates to a unique ontological encounter, consider a religious sacred icon in a cathedral, then reproduced in a textbook, then reposted online as a meme, then screen printed on a music concert promotional t-shirt, then reprinted on a coffee mug for sale in a museum gift shop, then used as an anti-counterfeit token on a countries legal tender, then seen in passing splashed up on the latest fashion brands Times Square electronic billboard, and then re-generated by AI for a fringe political party's election campaign... These are not merely different representations of the same subject, they are different ontological encounters produced by different ecotonal crossings.

As each medium carries different concordances; subjects become partially transformed by entering them. It is through the medium's transitional ontological zones that meaning emerges via those crossings. This is a relational ontology of art, where none of the elements exist in isolation long enough to be treated as fixed causes. Instead, they continuously co-reconstitute each other.

The ecotone transitional zones are where the forms transitioning them undergo migrations, translations, negotiation, transformation, distortion and mutation of meaning. It is where ontological reconfiguration happens, and art emerges from these shifting pressure fields.

The ecotones synergistic pressures upon the arterroir, implys that art does not simply occur from the genius of isolated creators acting upon passive materials. It instead emerges from ecotonal negotiations between systems of perception, mediation, history, technology, and culture. The artwork is therefore not a fixed object, but a temporary stabilization within an ongoing ecological field of transformation.

The artist exists within this arterroir transformative synergy. They have absorbed context, history, and communal memory. They are already an effect of this cultural and material ecology long before exercising agency in the arterroir. Becoming aware of the import of the arterroir's ecotonal transition zones allows the artist to deliberately focus their co-collaboration within it.

Footnotes & Selected Resonances

1. John Berger, **The look of things** (New York: Viking Press, 1974), pg 205.

2. Eugene P. Odum and Gary W. Barrett, **Fundamentals of Ecology**, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2005), pg 158–159.

3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in **Image: Music: Text**, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977)

4. Marshall McLuhan, **Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man** (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pg 8.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in **Illuminations**, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pg 217–52.