The Digital Art: Expansion of Media Art –What Will Remain of the Electronic Age?

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Statement of Theses on Art and Electronics

"La création est prioritaire. La communication vient quand on a quelque-chose à communiquer."

Pierre Boulez

Media art of today is not a creation of the eighties. It had been clearly "on the scene" before, somewhere between 1965 and 1970, another time when the term "expansion" was linked to art.[1] And to be exact, the years 1950 to 1955 have to be stated as the years of its origin. It was then that the electronic age of art set in, and it did so simultaneously at various levels. Architecture and electronic music joined hands in the Philips Pavilion at the Exposition of Brussels in 1958, which could be traced back to Donaueschingen in 1953, when Pierre Schaeffer had distributed his "Orphée" music among several loudspeakers. In 1952—53 Karlheinz Stockhausen, then 23 years of age, had worked with Pierre Schaeffer in Paris, his first composition with synthetic sounds consisting of sine tones resulted in the "Electronic Study I" in 1953.

Wolf Vostell met Stockhausen in 1954, in 1959 he started his electronic dé-collages by television-distortion and electro-acoustic objects. In 1958, Nam June Paik started to work in the studio for electronic music of the WDR Köln (the West German Broadcasting Company, Cologne); five years later he exhibited his "Music-Electronic Television" in Wuppertal.

Everyone not closing his eyes had to be drawn into the whirl of the development of art and technology. A network of significant exhibitions, of group and individual activities was flashing around our globe, at the peak of an age that was putting brilliant questions and giving brilliant answers.

The "Art & Technology Circus" (and I think of a poetic, elated and elating, mobile circus, of an obsessed group of producers) performed in New York in October 1966, presenting "9 evenings. theatre and engineering," and in Eindhoven from September to December 1966, presenting "KunstLichtKunst." From May to August 1967, Frank Popper organized his "Lumière et Mouvement" in Paris in the same, slowly decaying museum of the City of Paris in which he presented "Electra" in 1983—84.

Things were on their way! Legendary 1968 brought Pontus Hulténs' performance of "The Machine–As Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age" in New York. "Technology now dominates every step of everyday life completely," an introduction to the last part of an exhibition dedicated to "Art and Technology" stated. "Cybernetic Serendipity"–a term implying the gift of "making chance discoveries"–was organized by Jasia Reichardt in London that same year, definitely presenting the computer as an instrument for artists.

The final programs of the "Art & Technology Circus" were the two most ambitious ones. First, the five-year project by Maurice Tuchman titled "Art and Technology," for which the curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art assembled artists and industry to culminate in an exhibition in May 1971. And second, the "Pavilion" at the world's fair of Osaka in 1970. Billy Klüver, a scientist and engineer, at that time president of the E.A.T. group (Experiments in Art and Technology, founded in 1966), which was designing the "Pavilion," saw the

opportunity for the individual to relate to the world around by means of technology: "For tackling these difficult problems the immediate, forward sensibility of the artists is needed."

First thesis: From the beginnings of electronic art in the first half of the fifties through the establishment of the entire range of the media in the second half of the sixties, we have now, in the middle of the eighties, reached a peak of the interaction of art and technology. Development obviously happens in the form of cycles. I expect the presently expanding interest in technological art to reach a summit and then decline.

The question must be put: What will remain of the electronic age concerning the realm of art? It is evident that the first two cycles have not found a place in our storehouses for cultural goods, the museums, and even less have they found continuing cultivation, research and communication.

Our museums are by no means laboratories for a new philosophy of the history of art–a postulate raised by Alexander Dorner in the twenties, which he himself had tried to fulfill by including the "abstract cabinet" of and together with El Lissitzky in his museum in Hannover and by preparing another one with Moholy-Nagy.

Second thesis: Electronic/technological art, media art, constitutes a leap in development, new as to its quality, structure and genesis, that may be compared in its effects to the emergence of panel-painting with all the social, economic, educational effects involved. This art is not a continuation of panel-painting or sculpture with new means. Artist and spectator will certainly bring along their experiences made with other objects of art, their pattern, so to speak; the viewing eye looks at this different art through the experiences made. The spectator of media art, however, need not have passed through a training in the history of art, just as the twelve-year-old pupil who sits at the computer programming his drawing arsenal need not have been initiated into the history of art, indeed, may be completely ignorant of it (and probably is, anyhow, I'm sorry to say!).

The structure of the audience at exhibitions of holography, therefore, is absolutely inhomogenous, no longer the somewhat homogeneous group that would visit an exhibition of Kandinsky or surrealism. Lacking statistical data I trust my personal observation in arriving at this conclusion, which may, however, be put to test any time.

If media art does constitute a new stage of development, then we have to ask for adequate places to display and store this art, that is, we have to ask for media museums.

Third thesis: Fine art today happens within a system of three components. Besides graphic and plastic art, which appear to be inexhaustible as they are being rediscovered and executed anew in spite of their historic course, media or electronic/technological art is likely to gain ground, to be joined by environmental art as the third of these three components.

As always, there will be artists "occupying" all of the three fields with their work, and there will be artists concentrating on one field of work. Again I want to ask: How can the museum–being the relevant place–display, investigate, store such a system of three components? The museum must not be relieved of its duty of being the place of reference for works of remaining value. Certainly, film, photography, video, disc, tape, etc. are media to store events of art. Where should they be collected, examined and passed on if not in an adequate, that is, in a media museum?

Design Technologies or What Have You In the catalogue of the exhibition "Art and Technology–setting out towards new realities"[2] which I organized, I introduced and explained the term " design-technology." We need a fitting term to denote the procedures and results of media art and to avoid the pitfalls of discussion and assessment of artistic and/or technical/technological quality.

François Molnar, co-founder of the "Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel" had called design a bridge between art and science. We must not apply the yardstick of "the concept of art" to the works and processes of contemporary technological art. We will not be able to perceive and appreciate what is new.

It is a characteristic of holographic and computer-generated works, presented in exhibitions since the mid-sixties, that they have often been produced by scientists or engineers who were most interested in questions of the fine arts or rather of "design," more so, actually, than many experts of art history, the world of museums, and art publications.

Obviously, this was also due to the limited accessibility of the new media, holography and computer design. So far, laboratories are outrageously expensive. With the cost for one hour of laboratory (at a film studio in Munich, for producing professional videotapes, this runs around 3,000 German marks), there is hardly any chance for an artist, unless he has a commission from industry–which usually implies some limitations, however. Experimental work is not possible unless access to the instruments becomes universal.

Video and computer have become more readily available. This is not yet true for holography, video disc or video text (btx) to the extent that they may be used as artists media. A number of positive advances can be expected. Ars Electronica of Linz can claim to have paved the way and to continue doing so. The expansion of media art would not have attained its present rank without the variety of opportunities offered and realized so courageously and future-minded in Linz throughout the past years. The following questions remain: Where and how should instruction in the media be given? What about the media museum? How can the technological instruments be made more readily available?

Instruction and training for artists in the media age must be reconsidered. I quote the German sociologist Rolf Darendorf, who wrote recently, "The future does not consist of the traditional working world it is one that combines high technology with a new social construction of human life." Schools of art must raise and discuss the issue of artistic work and its communication to society. They must include the expanding media art.

I want to refer to the working group "Media development/Media research" at the College of Design in Offenbach/Main. This group, directed by Manfred Eisenbeis, presented video-texts developed by artists according to CEPT standards[3]) at the Internationale Funkausstellung Berlin in 1983. Eisenbeis comments, "Video-text is a medium today, taking its place in the context of print media and television."

Another positive example is that of the artist-in-residence program offered by the New York Museum of Holography, for instance. Such programs ought to be expanded. Industry, computer companies, television stations ought to be enlisted to supply new opportunities for artists.

I welcome the opening of the so-called media landscape, provided it does not deteriorate to become a mere can-opener to an increasing number of shallow, purely commercial programs.

Unfortunately, the road that is being taken in the Federal Republic of Germany at present concerning cable pilot projects, tends to become such a can-opener. Organizers stress repeatedly that they are only providing the "roof," transmission time. This could be an opportunity for experimental, artistic, cultural programs, they maintain.

These arguments hold in theory only Actually, however, what is missing, are the sponsors. A one-hour program, like the one recently made by Ralph Bernhardt of the MAZ-Studio Munich for cable TV, takes about 75,000 German marks, after all.[4] This is beyond the means of an independent producer, and neither public nor private donors have yet earmarked such funds for those purposes. I actually wonder if cable TV were not better restricted to local application, to state an example: telecasts of a university/college for the campus, for instance. Things would be easier that way. Experimental programs would be encouraged. The audience would be restricted to the vicinity of the university/college; the target group would be clearly defined. A state grant could be used to finance this like other university activities (fees, libraries, staff and maintenance costs, etc.). Of course, I refer to the Federal Republic of Germany.

THE MEDIA MUSEUM: WHAT REMAINS?

"This new kind of a cultural institute would not only not be a museum of ‘art’ statically speaking, but not even a ‘museum,’ This new kind could be compared to a power station rather, to a generator of new forces."

Alexander Dorner

At a cost of four and a half billion francs, the Musée de la Villette is being built in Paris, dedicated to science, technology, and industry. The giant steel hall from the 19th century in the park of the museum is to house the Paris Biennale in autumn 1985, having as its topic "Intersection of Technologies." Much money and concrete aims have been invested to manifest our electronic age in architecture and in topical programs.

What should a museum of media art, a museum for the new media television, video, video-disc, video-text, cybernetic sculptures, computer-generated art, intermedia-theatre, laser, holography, be like what provisions ought to be made?

The problems posed by the production, collection, storage, playback facilities of these works are absolutely novel when compared to those of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and–maybe–photographs up to now housed in museums. This applies to equipment, layout of rooms, audience participation as well as to the structure of the building as such. In his book *Überwindung der Kunst* (Overcoming Art; 3rd edition 1958), Alexander Dorner has given the following characteristic, without referring directly to a media museum. "There is no need for a magnificent palace but much rather for a functional, flexible construction of light, modern materials. Its success would go back to the creativeness and the initiative of its director, that is, to his receptivity and the thrust of his decisions and his activity." The new museums built in the Federal Republic of Germany in recent years are more of the palace kind. No wonder that now the millions used for the respective buildings in Stuttgart, Mönchengladbach, and so on are not available for the concern proper. There are hardly any funds for buying works of media art, which causes serious financial problems for the producers and constitutes lacking information of the public.

A new media museum might include a proper workshop. It might provide the necessary equipment to artists lacking such installations at present. The new museum might also serve as a terminal to pool the various services, capacities, results. Sooner or later, the advances of

technology will make us connect our own display screen to such a museum. Many services will be available to everyone. The expansion of media art calls for such an autonomous, new kind of museum. Existing museums for holography (in New York, Paris, Pulheim near Cologne) are stepping-stones on our way. A media museum resembles a network (and I do not think of cables now) linking new technologies." radio and television companies, educational institutions, libraries, mediatheques and so on.

NOTES

1. See Jürgen Claus, Expansion der Kunst (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970; new edition: Berlin: Ullstein Taschenbuch, 1982).

2. Exhibition "Kunst und Technologie–Aufbruch in neue Wirklichkeiten" (Art and Technology–setting out towards new realities), Federal Ministry of Research and Technology Bonn, September 9—October 5, 1984.

3. As compared to field tests with coarse rasters, CEPT standards have greatly improved the quality of video texts. CEPT is the abbreviation of "Conférence Européenne des Administrations des Postes et des Télécommunications."

4. Reference is made to the first cable film with and on artists, first presented in the Ludwigshafen cable project on January 26, 1984, entitled "Künstler ’84."