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Media Art

Today the world of images, texts, and sounds has assembled at a single terminal at which the "artist" of tomorrow can be found ready to combine them at his will: at the Paint Box. In conventional terms this would imply a brush, paints, and an easel. In keeping with today's technology they are the computer, the synthesizer, and the display. To anyone working at the paint box these three elements connected to the network of producers, users, and memories of images, texts, and sounds constitute the hub of the world.

From the vast and no longer conceivable abundance of information available, the very best result can be chosen from among ever accumulating new possibilities of information. The linearity and "identity" of script bursts into an interminable array of images, texts, and sounds plunging a one-dimensional, reduced picture of the world into an abundance of subjective world pictures, and again creating in never-ending combination a new work. Carried away by the vortex of his product, the operator has to accept an open work of art.

The world has assembled at this place not to be defined, but to discuss the present possibilities in a dialogue. This is what is new about the magnetism of the video clip, this currently hottest item which serves best to illustrate the faculties of the paint box. Who knows what the future has in store for us? I do not want to claim that the clips are the best products in the world of the media. Their producers adhere too much to past patterns of avantgarde and to sex and crime stereotypes. Their unity of image, text, and sound, however, has reached the latest denominator. That is to say, that they encompass all the conventional media as well as taking up any newly developed technological finesse.

The result can be both the picture of an open garbage can as well as Global Groove (Paik 1973). They are the best means to convey the susceptibility of our days, of our global entanglement, also of the post-modern situation, the constant threat of the arsenals of nuclear bombs. They are a means of expression for the billions of people, for their most subtly differentiated idiosyncrasies and manifestations. Certainly only to the extent that individual desires and concepts can be realized, and not if the distribution and the handling of clips is concentrated in the all-powerful mass media of our days.

Stating it simply, we may say that so far the media have been used by whoever was in the chair to organize the masses. This has not been quite as obvious in film-making as it has been in the newspapers, the radio, and lately TV. There is a centre for the distribution of information responsible for editing, censoring, manipulating, and copying. Through most different channels, these so-called transmitters reach an audience of entirely different tastes who are, however, served the very same canned menu, whatever their wishes might be. The views formed during reception (over the years) effect a kind of simplification of the stereotypes of the media. They are linked mostly to the horror of everyday life and on the other hand to those images that develop into celebrities. There is no way of evading them, they stare at us from the most hidden corners.

We cannot escape these mechanisms, they have replaced the church of former days and the public places, and have become the carriers of the "ideology" of the society, which is turning into an increasingly similar global mass through the mass media notwithstanding the existence of blocs and different political credos. Anyone having seen the first hours of TV after World War II will confirm this. In consistence with the development of TV, there suddenly was a network operating in continuously larger orders, until it became the global network of today's satellite TV.

This has made the world orbital. It is directed from outside, from above, and future generations of explorers and conquerors will no longer traverse jungles and the seas to discover new land; after landing on the moon in 1969 (with rather little effect), they now fly to manned space stations which in the meantime control our planet Earth together with hundreds of satellites. As in all instances of progress, this is first of all a military control; they monitor, they take photographs, they spy. The heads of the powerful have separated from their shoulders and are cruising through space like the countenance of God.

Just as exhaust fumes heat up our atmosphere, so do military techniques. The orbit is to hold security for our future, in the gigantic project of SDI. We should not really object to hotheads fighting their battles at a safe distance from our earth, however, in the end, will it not come down on us? Whatever future technologies

may be opened up through orbital thinking, should we not rather solve the global problems first before adjourning them into orbit?

The Star Wars program proves that war no longer needs soldiers but technocrats. Furthermore, war is no longer easily to be detected, it takes place in the product and obsolescence of arms, and on the small but very effective scale of terror attacks by groups of most different origin, who do not hesitate to make civilians victims of their attacks. Thus anyone is the potential victim not only of actual aggression but also of some program pattering down on him/ her. This is true also of our cultural activities: first we have to undergo the hot-cold treatment of different tastes, quality claims and acts of self-realization before finding ourselves. We have to become permeable, to be open, and then perhaps we may decide for this one first and for something else later on, as to how we define quality, value, or simply our preference. There is an "immaterial imperialism" of the images at the global cultural front, we are branded, as formerly herds of cattle were branded with the mark of their owner. Adolescents crave for these marks, they are fans, they adore their idols. Rather late they realize that they were nothing but the sunny side, the unreachable distance of the closeness of their parents or friends, who are only profane compared to the luring appeal of the heroes of mass culture.

The difficulty is not to be deceived by this mechanism of the cultivation of images, and to contribute personally to the production of culture, so as to change culture for the masses into culture by the masses. A culture by groups who stay open and change, a culture aware of the individual, because the individual is not only a recipient but also, if he or she desires, an active producer. This seems to be fulfilled in the case of the artist. He/she creates his work unhampered by conditions and constraints. We can neglect the question if the artist can live by his work or has to find another way to earn his living.

His autonomy, however, will be only fictitious if, as is often the case in the eighties, his product conforms so much, that together with his signature it has turned into a mere consumer good differing from a pair of loudspeakers only by being unique. The function would remain the same: acoustic or optical satisfaction. "Wild" painting has largely become the impudent exploitation of an outdated concept of the artist (the master painter). These works witness a retreat action shunning the use of the potentialities offered by all the media and the opportunity of creating media art.

We can speak of media art only if the artistic intent asserts itself within a certain medium: unlike the usual seedy eyewash. It makes no difference if the medium is used pure, mixed, or in new combinations. The emphasis will always be on passing on that spark to real life—to intermediary action and performance. The work of art is not to point to itself exclusively, it is to encourage the recipient to become active.

This is the seed of dialogue that can be developed further, if the work of art becomes the interface of a dialogue of thoughts and perhaps also of common creation. The new media like film and video lend themselves to this purpose as did former rituals. They are cooperation and shared experience. And an artistic product always takes account of its audience. The audience shares in the production of the exhibit, contributes its imagination, and becomes a participant. This also applies to the paint box. There is not merely an input and an output and some black box in between. No, it is a game with known elements, changed by chance into possibilities not seen, heard of, or thought of before.