

TAKEOVER

about the thing formerly known as art

The idea of the Digital Revolution is going through its first real crisis. Not its first economic crisis—we've already been through times of trouble when the great flagships of the computer industry were sleeping through the decisive paradigm shift from mainframes to PCs—but its first cultural identity crisis. What had become tantamount to a leitmotif of a better future in which, the story went, telcos and dotcoms—stocks for everyman's portfolio—would enable one and all to celebrate a new form of collective wealth and prosperity as a surprise dividend of global neo-liberalism is now a scenario in which the columnists of the bourgeois feuilletons are scurrying in the wake of tanking stock prices to trash the entire idea of an economy based on information and virtuality.

So, what are the implications for media art, which owes its development and the public attention it has garnered essentially to the same dynamics that have shaped the course of the New Economy? Can media art, understood as an overarching term encompassing artistic encounters with the technological reality of our world, sustain its innovative dynamism? Will it, in keeping with an avant-gardist definition, maintain its potential to contribute to overall social development, or will its power, its glamour and its attractiveness fade in a world in which media are increasingly commonplace features of everyday life, and finally be relegated to the showcases of museums?

Just as in the financial markets, many commentators—those who knew it all along—see in this the return to good old-fashioned values and the confirmation of their unshakable beliefs. Nevertheless, somewhat removed from the main trend, the contours of the next new thing are already taking shape, since the "Digital Revolution" has long since given rise to totally new forms and manifestations of art that have situated themselves for the most part beyond the realm of the art establishment and have largely gone unnoticed by or failed to gain acceptance from that establishment.

A creativity burst is underway which goes far beyond a mere quantitative increase in the number of those who are laboring on design tasks and challenges in both professional and amateur settings and is, first and foremost, a qualitative phenomenon—a development that is also increasingly bringing forth new geographical focal points including the emerging economies that have been geo-culturally uncharted territory for media art. One example is Malaysia, which, despite its deep economic slump during the Asia Crisis of the '90s, carried out plans to construct a multimedia super-corridor, and is now in the process of also creating the brainpower to utilize this infrastructure with lavishly equipped multimedia universities or—with an idea that strikes us as rather peculiar—people's Internet instruction whereby thousands of individuals gather in the giant sport stadiums of Kuala Lumpur to learn together how to use a computer and the Internet.

The dynamism of the TAKEOVER does not originate from art institutions of education, practice and mediation (and not even by those that could be ascribed to contemporary art), but rather by largely heterogeneous scenes that are for the most part not in contact with each other. Perhaps all that they have in common is that their activities are not merely a distanced-reflective reaction to techno-social changes, and are rather themselves a part or a derivative of this development.

The computer and the Internet—as the leading technologies of current changes—are not

only highly developed production and distribution media; they also act as a rapid reference system in which ideas, talents and capabilities emerge and are refined, enhanced and perfected through the inspiring interplay of cooperation and competition.

Here, a comparison with a “third culture” seeking to merge or reconcile the natural sciences and the humanities that was already being propagated back in the ‘60s would not go to the heart of the matter since this approach is overly restricted to intellectual, academic positions. Rather more to the point are the descriptions of a technology-based pop culture that, however, long ago ceased being the exclusive purview of wired nerds and now encompasses a considerably broader population that does not pay even the slightest heed to such postmodern divergences, thus bringing to light a matter they take completely for granted which many Keepers of the Intellectual Discourse prefer to dismiss with bounteous arrogance and short-sightedness as a trifle or a sign of anomie. Even if loathing towards or fear and ignorance of technology are foreign to the nature of Nintendo and text message kids, who rather tend to quickly affirm industry standards, they are anything but socio-politically indifferent.

The rallies coordinated via cell phone and Internet, the cyberspace and online demonstrations of the digital activists are no longer exclusively aimed at environmental pollution and neo-liberal globalization, but now also target the practices of data surveillance and information control. In Menwith Hill, UK, Greenpeace activists broke into a radar facility that is part of the Echelon global surveillance system and took over a radar tower there the way they used to occupy the stacks and cooling towers of atomic power plants. Actions like these—and, above all, the demonstrations from Seattle to Genoa—show that protest is also being taken from the Internet out into the streets.

The task of tomorrow's artists is that of an intermediary, a catalyst between diverse fields of knowledge, ways of thinking, social models, and solution strategies.

With this TAKEOVER festival, Ars Electronica is focusing on the protagonists of this development—those who have cast off preconceived notions and, displaying strong commitment in the face of considerable risk, are opening up new territories in which their role and their scope of action have not yet been defined. Whether in highly explosive sociopolitical settings, on scientific fronts such as the fields of biotechnology and genetic engineering, or in new economic alliances, their *modi operandi*, motivations, strategies and aims define them as artists, and the progressive effects of their work make what they do art.

The scene is defined by self-reinventors and spin-offs who have acquired their softskills in direct dealings with the material or as by-products of the media design institutes, most of which are not oriented on art but on the training of media workers. It is rife with the massed potential of pros proceeding with self-assurance and possessing all the prerequisites and skills to implement their own ideas and not just to provide content to fill the design vacuum of commercial software.

The actual institutional training facilities (academies and universities) should/can by no means be relieved of their duty. Their mission must not be to regard themselves as the last bastions of the inculcation with the rituals of art in the face of the ultimately irresistible deluge of media development, but rather to do what is not being or cannot be done by specialized institutions of higher learning: to introduce critical thinking about the cultural and social relevance of new media technologies into the process of coming to terms with them. To accomplish this, analytical approaches that go beyond the semiospheres of the respective technologies are necessary. What is, after all, to be expected when hands-on training in dealing with the new is indeed offered, but the process of reflection about and the design of new artistic strategies insistently maintains the existing codex?

The strategies of art, the way of working and modes of expression of art pervade other realms of society ever more frequently and with increasingly longer lasting consequences. Art dissolves like minerals in a fluid—it might be invisible to the lethargic eyes of those who wish to see only with customary criteria but it does not disappear. It assumes a function and has an effect.

The traditional rituals of access to the world of art are irrelevant, and many no longer even bother to seek accreditation from the art establishment.

The boundaries and transitions between creativity and art may have to be reevaluated; nevertheless, when it comes down to the assessment of the effects on society, these differentiations are no longer relevant. The constant yammering back and forth about “artist” as occupational designation or justification has ceased to be of interest; it is as unnecessary as those positions that are meant to be defended thereby.

Once we stop regarding the Internet as nothing more than a technical form of communication and instead take it seriously as a social and cultural realm, then it becomes clear what gigantic dimensions the Internet as a design work-in-progress has, and that doesn't mean just the work to be done on the interfaces and external packaging of screen and web design, but also and above all the design of modes of access and functionality, the structuring of models of action and the spaces in which to implement them, not only interface design, but also design as an interface between the intention of the user and the intentionality that is the basis of content, an interface as a precondition for the committed involvement on the part of the user, as a link-up of content into a sensory, cognitive context of (inter)action. The question of the human-computer interface—that is, the nexus at which man and machine, real space and virtual domains, come together—is not only to be understood as a matter of hardware, but rather as one of cultural and economic living conditions under which we can consummate this encounter.

The art of tomorrow will be done by the engineers of experience in their workshops of world-invention and world-creation. It will be staged at a venue located between Las Vegas and the Tate Modern, between IT algorithms and protein sequences.

The territorial gains of art in the domains of technology and its business sectors are an important contribution to creating that urgently needed latitude in which the unexpected, the unplanned can take place. Without wishing to conceptualize this as a relationship of a priori antagonism, this also includes the contradictory stance which the explanatory models of science foster among artists.

The avant-gardist principle of art striving to be a driving force and to impart momentum to the development of society as a whole has undergone a shift—science, pop culture and subcultural niches, business & entertainment, software engineering, etc. are the epicenters of the exciting leading-edge developments.

First and foremost, there is the game industry, a multibillion-dollar market in which, of course, art initially plays no role. But it is through these games that new themes, new forms of narration and expression and thus new forms of medial communication emerge and go about the process of becoming the predominant cultural model. Anyone who doubts this need only look at the development of film technology/cinematic art/the movie industry and draw the appropriate conclusions. The filming of *Tomb Raider* marks a turning point at which film becomes a merchandising product of games.

The success of digital gaming with its cultural and economic ramifications is not only the manifestation of a business model; it also represents the triumph of VR technology—although in a considerably different form than has long been ballyhooed. It is not the devices, but rather the methods of dealing with content and mediating the encounter with it, the creation of non-real worlds and their computer-supported depiction as realities that can be experienced emotionally and in which the user can participate and have input into decisions and designs that ultimately make up the vision of VR and which are inherent in the success of the gaming industry—even while totally dispensing with data helmets and cybergloves.

Somewhat beyond the confines of the commercial sector, what is also going on in gaming is the critique of or the confrontation with the Givens, with the world as it really is, in that the rules—natural laws as well as the respective societal codex—are broken or rewritten in what has come to be called “hacking the rules.” What is often criticized as retreat or refuge (“... the real world is bad enough; why do we need a virtual one to boot ...”) reveals itself to be a very promising strategy of analysis and a tool to develop and evaluate alternatives or counter-models (as we have long been accustomed in literature, though with the difference that the immediate application situation of games and above all the networked shared environments of multi-user games also allows for the immediate testing of such strategies) elaborating which changes could establish themselves as the shared reality.

The noble-minded withdrawal to art-immanent positions may appear to be an option to some, but this doesn't work as a basis upon which to design alternatives and potentially fruitful concepts, nor is it a suitable way to insure the role of contemporary art in social and cultural development.

The question concerning the makers of art, however, deals not only with those who create it, but also with those who manage it and make money out of it. Branding and franchising as strategies of market positioning and market dominance, and the efforts to recontextualize and canonize media art in order to negotiate its return to the fold of art elicit great skepticism. The inertia of traditional art institutions and the increasing privatization of the funding of art are reinforcing the trend among a young generation of artists to establish their own platforms, collaborative undertakings, and business models, whereby the ongoing brain drain into the media and advertising industries threatens to soon leave the art world behind like a ghost town.

What once could have been subsumed under the heading of media art has since branched out into a multiplicity of new artistic genres, symbiotic forms whose definitions are rather more oriented on scientific and technical disciplines, on interface development and information architecture or on net culture and the lifestyle of gaming communities than on the isms of the artistic discourse.

This development is being carried forward by individuals whose identity is bounded by the parameters artist, engineer, social worker and experience designer, and who act out of a clear understanding of its technological as well as its associated social and cultural aspects: coders and hackers, open sourcers, circuit benders, who acquire mastery over technological components, ignore rules found in user's manuals, who deploy devices and systems in ways unintended by those who market them, and participate, with this analytical and critical processing, in the design of the way our world is now—art as a test-drive of the future

It is patently obvious that the fine arts' domineering pre-eminence over media art cannot continue. The art of tomorrow is the art of the media; it is just as much music and performance as it is hardware-handicraft and software concept. And the theories of this sort of art have yet to be written.