

■■■■■■■■■ Not Yet Mutually Reconciled: The Museum and Media Art

Four decades of video, expanded cinema, projectors, monitors and user interfaces for projection and interaction as the central components of artistic production and exhibition of artists' output. And still a problem for the museum. Not an easy thing for exhibition designers and collection curators to come to grips with. A challenge for audience members who, in their encounters with works of art, have internalized practices that differ markedly from those called for by presentations dependent upon time and lighting (or rather black-out) conditions.

Newly built museums—even those of the early 21st century like the Lentos Museum of Art in Linz—are still inadequately equipped to handle works of art that turn out to be difficult neighbors. That demand closed shutters where the others show off their best side in broad daylight, and that might only then be able to unfold all of their qualities when they are permitted to get a bit noisy.

This is mostly a matter of video works: in the context of museums and exhibitions, media art is in most instances synonymous with video art. Interactive electronic works, network projects and software-oriented experimental arrays continue to be peripheral phenomena in the mainstream museums of the art world. It is still the case that art that explores its possibilities through the use of state-of-the-art technology and investigates its impact on human beings and society is marginalized in so-called high culture.

Linz is the internationally renowned exception that proves this rule. Amazingly, it has already been 25 years since Linz's cultural policymakers initiated *Ars Electronica*, the festival for art, technology and society that, in the meantime, with the construction of the *Ars Electronica Center*, now has a museum of its own at its disposal. This neighborly arrangement of the *Ars Electronica Center* and the *Lentos Museum* makes possible a division of responsibilities without entanglement in a dogmatic turf war. In this partnership situation, the *Lentos* can emphasize video art in its current program. The fact that, in this anniversary year, the museum can serve as venue for the *Festival retrospective* exhibition is a good indication of the congenial relations between the two institutions.

Film and video—already historic media today—assume tremendous relevance for contemporary artistic formulations in the media world of the 21st century. They cannot be ignored by anyone confronting the art being done right now. Nevertheless, any exhibition of media art is a balancing act involving the optimal, the doable and—an unfortunately all-too-frequent result—the inadequate. Outcomes in this last category are painfully familiar to exhibition visitors: monitors relegated far off the beaten track, pale projections, poor picture quality, stuffy black sanctums and background soundscapes that insistently take over the entire exhibition space. These irritations are partially attributable to spatial and technical limitations and the financial constraints related to them. In this respect, at least, there are grounds for optimism. Most recently, the development of the affordably priced high-illumination beamer and the replacement of quickly worn-out videocassettes by precise and robust DVDs have considerably enhanced viewing pleasure. So then—it doesn't always have to be flickering, color-skewed, out-of-focus images deployed to fuel resistance to motion pictures in art exhibitions.

On the other hand, this slapdash presentation is also undoubtedly based on a more or less conscious hierarchization of artistic genres. Does a painting ever hang in the corridor leading to the toilets? Unthinkable for the “heavyweight class” of the visual arts—

but it is not at all unusual to be confronted by a monitor or processor shunted off to some out-of-the-way nook of an exhibition venue. The persistent, latent disdain for media art obvious in numerous institutions is inevitably transmitted to museumgoers. Reservations regarding media art are the most deep-rooted and the hardest to eradicate among the rampant prejudices about contemporary art. The verdict is heard incessantly—from laymen and art experts alike—that a visit to this or that exhibition was marred by too much media art.

The suspicion that suggests itself is that its proximity to commercial, popular culture is the source of the resistance diagnosed here. Art should still always be something “special,” something “different,” and ought to go about being it as unmistakably as possible.

But perhaps a work of contemporary art only becomes interesting when it does precisely that—dispenses with traditional modes of artistic expression such as painting and sculpture. In doing so, it not only sets itself apart in a yet-to-be-defined status but also calls upon those encountering it to undertake general considerations of the particular and of art’s criteria of distinction, and enables us to recognize the content and methods that define art as a critical-analytical tool.

As an artform that shares its medium with the most commercial, most insipid and most widespread products of profit-oriented mass culture, video art, with its images, content and narrative forms, dares to distance itself considerably from the insignias of high art. Just how far can this process of removal go without becoming banal?

Most contemporary videos—whether one-channel or conceived as a space-encompassing installation—are oriented on dispositive cinematic film.

The early video works of the 1970s undertook first and foremost an analysis of the cinematic apparatus, of spatial illusion and time shift, as well as critique of strict (primarily male-authored) manipulation by means of the mode of depiction and montage of moving images (Dan Graham, Valie Export, Martha Rosler and Eleanor Antin for example). Such investigations are by no means obsolete; nevertheless, since the mid-’90s or so, artistic video production has been oriented for the most part on the visual and narrative conventions of commercial film and TV. This connection can be established in the work of many of the most internationally successful artists—for instance, Stan Douglas, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Shirin Neshat and Isaac Julien, to once again mention only a few. Or Darren Almond, whose “Live Sentence” installation will be set up in the Lentos Museum during Ars 2004. This work deals with the visuality of surveillance and punishment systems; to do so, it adapts perspectives with which omnipresent control systems operate.

In that they utilize familiar imagery models, artists confirm the role of the visual message as today’s dominant means of communications. They also know that visual media have to rely on the use of blatant stereotypes and on endless repetition, and that this is how collective values are produced in a society. Its subversion of the consensual use and interpretation of images is what makes media art fascinating. With the magnetism of pictures made of light, this radiant seductress disrupts the comfortable consumption of images and accustomed convictions. The museum is a good place for this.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald