Don’t Call it Art: Ars Electronica 2003

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In choosing CODE as its theme, Ars Electronica 2003 has capitalized on (some would say: appropriated) developments within the field of new media art that already have been going on for a few years. As Andreas Broeckmann (the Artistic Director of Transmediale festival, Berlin) reminded the audience in his concluding presentation during the Ars Electronica symposium, already 5 years ago New York based artist John Simon suggested that it would be useful to treat software-based art as a separate category. Consequently, since 2001 the Transmediale festival competition has included “artistic software” as one of its categories, and devoted a significant space to it in the festival’s symposiums. Another important platform for presenting software art has become the Whitney Museum in New York and its Artport web site where curator Cristiane Paul has organized a number of important exhibitions during the last few years. As of 2002, software art became the subject of a new, smaller-scale but very significant festival, README. The 2002 README took place in Moscow, while 2003’s was in Helsinki. Finally, in January 2003, festival organisers (Alexei Shulgin, Olga Goriunova, Alex McLean, and others) established a comprehensive web portal for software art RUNME.ORG. Containing at present more than 60 categories, RUNME is an evolving conceptual map of what I see as the larger meaning of the term “software art”: the significant, diverse, and real creative activities at the intersections between culture, art, and software.

Given that Ars Electronica has much more significant resources than probably any other festival of media or new media art in the world, one would expect that it would correspondingly take the discussions of software art and culture to a new level. Unfortunately, my impression of the festival (note that although I spent five full days at the festival, I still could not make it to every single panel and

performance) is that instead it narrowed the focus of these discussions. Intentionally or not, software art became equated with algorithmically generated media: still and moving images and sound. To quote the definition of “art created out of code” from Ars Electronica program, it is “a generative artform that has been derived and developed from computational processes” (the statement by the directors of Ars Electronica, festival program, p. 2). More than once I had to check my program to make sure that I was indeed at Ars Electronica 2003 rather than SIGGRAPH – or an earlier Ars Electronica edition from the 1980s when computer imaging indeed represented the key creative area of digital arts field. In a strange loop, Ars Electronica festival came full circle to include its own past. In the mid 1990s, recognizing that production of computer images was no longer confined to the digital “avant-garde” but became the norm in culture at large, Ars Electronica dropped this category, replacing it with “Net Vision / Net Exellence.” So why in 2003, would the Ars Electronica exhibition and symposium once again devote such significant space to algorithmically generated visuals and sound? As even a quick look through README depository demonstrates, “software art” constitutes an extremely diverse set of contexts, interests, and strategies, with algorithmic media generation being only one direction among many others.

It is true that the Ars Electronica 2003 symposium has made important gestures towards addressing larger social and political issues, since along with the discussions of code as software and the corresponding area of “software art,” it also included discussions of “law code” and biological code.” And the Festival statements describing these topics were right on target, for instance: “software sets the standards and norms, and determines the rules by which we communicate in a networked world, do business, and gather and disseminate information” (Gerfried Stocker, statement in the Festival catalog). Yet by having only a few speakers to cover each of these areas, the symposium could not explore these important areas in much depth. I see this in general as simultaneously both positive and negative feature of many European media festivals. On the one hand it is very stimulating and entertaining to attend a

festival which includes art exhibitions, film screenings, music performances, intellectual discussions, and late night parties – these kinds of hybrid events are practically non-existent in North America where one goes a museum to see a thematic exhibition, to a University to attend a conference on intellectual topics, to a club to dance, and so on. On the other hand, just as a typical software program which tries to cover a number of different areas rarely has as much depth as the programs dedicated to these separate areas, often after attending a European media festival I have a feeling that the broadness of coverage prevented analysis of anything with much depth.

This definitely was my feeling at the end of this year's Ars Electronica – in spite of the brilliance of individual participants such as media theory veteran - Friedrich Kittler and emerging star Florian Cramer; virtuoso graphics programmers / designers Lia, Ben Fry, Casey Reas, Schoenerwissen, and others; the faculty and the students from the Department of Media and Art at University of Art, Media, and Design in Zurich who put on the show of student projects which I found to be the best exhibition at this year festival; Giaco Schiesser, Christian Hubler, Christiane Paul, Andreas Broekmann (and I am sure many others speaking in the sessions I missed); last but not least, the musicians who put on what for me and many others I talked to was the highlight of the festival – a five hour marathon concert entitled Principles of Indeterminism: an Evening from Score to Code which presented a number of key works in the history of electronic music with a focus on Iannis Xenakis.

While CODE exhibition and Electrolobby staged at Brucknerhaus presented a lively and diverse set of artistic practice in and around the theme of software art, I felt that the larger questions about the role of software in cultural production were not taken up. Yet outside of Ars Electronica festival these questions are being already actively discussed. For instance, only during 2003 summer and fall exhibition seasons one could see a number of large museum exhibitions which go much further in addressing this area. I am thinking, for instance, of the

presentations of the architects whose practice is closely linked with software: solo exhibitions of Zara Hadid (MAK, Vienna), Greg Lynn (also at MAK), Asymptote (NAI, Rotterdam). In another example, the works of a number of the software artists who were shown at Ars Electronica exhibition were also included in a large exhibition ABSTRACTION NOW currently on display in Vienna's Kunsterhaus. By combining these software-driven works with the works of many other contemporary artists who do not use computers directly but instead practice what can be called "conceptual software" approach – that is, they base their output on particular conceptual procedures (sometimes closely approximating algorithms) -- this show by two young curators Norbert Pfaffenbichler and Sandro Droschl (both ex-students of Peter Weibel) successfully achieved precisely the effect which was missing from Ars Electronica's CODE exhibition. That is, ABSTRACTION NOW inserted software art within the larger fields of contemporary cultural production and thought, giving its visitors enough intelligently and provocatively organized material to reflect about the relationships between modern and contemporary art, media, visual culture, and software.

If I extend the context beyond the current exhibition season, Peter Weibel's curatorial practice after he left Ars Electronica in 1999 to become the director of ZKM exemplifies one effective strategy for new media field's survival. After his arrival, ZKM mounted a number of large scale shows devoted to large questions of cultural history (CTRL[Space], ICONOCLASH, and others); while new media was an essential components of these shows, it never provided the whole context. The recent show FUTURE CINEMA which more centrally focused on new media pursued another successful strategy: similar to Abstraction Now, it presented a larger context by including a range of artists, from hard-core "new media artists" (Masaki Fujihata, Luc Courchesne) to art world "media artists" (Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Isaac Julien, Gary Hill) amd older experimental filmmakers (Michael Snow, Chris Marker)

In the 1980s and first part of the 1990s when few outside of digital arts field used computers, the existence of the festival devoted to this field was very important. In the last few years, however, the situation changed dramatically. If pretty much everybody in the cultural field now uses digital media, computer networks, and the like, what exactly then do we see in Ars Electronica exhibitions during the last few years? What exactly is the phenomenon of “software art” - or larger phenomena of “digital art,” “new media art, “ “cyberart,” etc.? The key participants of Ars Electronica 2003 themselves take different positions here: Casey Reas told me (if I remember correctly) that he and Ben Fry think of themselves as designers while Golan Levin thinks of himself as artist (all three are ex-students of John Maeda from MIT Media Lab who himself acts in different roles of a designer, software designer, and artist). While this review does not give me space for a comprehensive analysis, lets briefly review the possible answers to these questions.

For instance, can “digital art” be considered a branch of contemporary art? Since the end of 1960s, modern art has become fundamentally a conceptual activity. That is, beyond conceptualism proper, art came to focus not on medium or techniques but on concepts. How these concepts are executed is either secondary, or simply irrelevant. When an artist asks gallery visitors to complete a questionnaire and then compiles and exhibits statistics (Hans Haacke), takes up a job as a maid in a hotel and documents hotel rooms (Sophie Calle), cooks a meal for gallery visitors (Rirkrit Tiravaniija), presents a found video tape shot by Russian troops in Chechnya (Sergei Bugaev, a.k.a. Africa), the traditional questions of artistic techniques, skills, and media become largely unimportant. As the well-known Russian artist Africa has put it: “the role of modern art is not to uncover a secret but instead to steal it.” Put differently, more and more contemporary artists act as a kind of journalists, researching and presenting various evidence through different media including text, still photographs, video, etc. What matters is the initial idea, a strategy, a procedure, rather than the details of how the findings or documentation are presented.

Of course not all artists today act as journalists – I am simply taking this as the most clear example of the new role of an artist, in contrast to the older roles of artist as craftsman, as the creator of symbols, allegories, and “representations,” etc. In short, a typical contemporary artist who was educated in the last two decades is no longer making paintings, or photographs, or video – instead, s/he is making “projects.” This term appropriately emphasizes that artistic practice has become about organizing agents and forces around a particular idea, goal, or procedure. It is no longer about a single person crafting unique objects in a particular media.

(Of course contemporary art is also characterized by a fundamental paradox – what collectors collect are exactly such old-fashioned objects rather than “projects.” Indeed, artists selling their works for highest prices in contemporary art market usually do produce such objects. This paradox is partialy resolved if you consider the fact that these artists always employ a staff of assistants, technicians, etc. – i.e. like everybody else they are making “projects” – only the collective nature of production in this case if concealed in favor of individual artists’ “brand names.”)

Although its highly social nature (people exchanging code, collaborating on projects together, treating audiences as equal participants, etc.) aligns “software art” with contemporary art, since it is firmly focused on its medium rather than medium-free concepts, “software art” cannot be considered “contemporary art.” This is one reason why it is indeed excluded by the art world. The logics of “contemporary art” and “digital art” are fundamentally at odds which each other, and I don’t see any easy way around this. So, for instance, when Ars Electronica program asks “In which direction is artists’ work with the new instruments like algorithms and dynamic systems transforming the process of artistic creativity?” (festival program, p. 9), the very assumptions behind such a question put it outside of the paradigm of contemporary art.

If “software art” does not belong to the cultural field of ‘contemporary art,” does it perhaps follows the earlier logic of artistic modernism? In other words, are we dealing here with a kind of “Modernism ver. 2,” since “software” and “digital artists” clearly spend lots of energy investigating new possibilities offered by digital computers and computer-based networks for representation and social communication and cooperation? This interpretation does not work either. Contrary to what you might have learned in art school, modernist artists were not formalists – at least in first half of a twentieth century. The incredible and unprecedented energy which went during these decades into inventing fundamentally new languages of visual communication, new forms, new artistic concepts of space and time, and so on, was rarely driven by purely formal concerns – i.e. investigating the specificity of a particular medium and purifying it from other influences to create works which did not refer to anything outside themselves (Greenberg). Instead, artists’ inventions were driven by multitude of larger questions and goals – representing absolute values and spiritual life; creating new visual language for a working class; representing the dynamism of contemporary city and the experience of war; representing the concepts of Einstein’s relativity theory; translating principles of engineering into visual communication; and so on. In contrast, today’s “digital artists” are typically proper formalists, with their discussions firmly centered on their particular medium – i.e. software. In short, they are not “new modernists,” because modernists were always committed to larger political, social, and spiritual values.

(Of course many European modernists were also quick to “sell” themselves, translating their achievements into simply a new style. By mid 1920s, Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Moholy-Nagy and others often took on commercial jobs for commercial clients who were happy to have ads and graphic identity done in new style. In short, within a few years modern art also became modern design. Yet this does not negate my argument because at least on the level of theory, the

modernist artists were always advocating larger ideas and values, even when working for commercial or state clients.)

If “digital art” does not qualify as “contemporary art” or “modern art,” does it then belong to “design”? Although some designers today indeed focus their energy on systematically investigating new representational and communication possibilities of digital media – John Maeda and his students being a perfect example – these designers represent a very small percentage of the overall design field. A typical designer simply takes the client’s brief and does something using already established conventions, techniques, and iconography. Thus to identify “digital art” with design is to wrongly assume that contemporary design field as a whole is devoted to “basic research” rather than “applications.”

If there is one social field whose logic is similar to the logic of ““digital art,” or “new media art” in general, in my view this field is not contemporary art, modern art, or design, but computer science. Like digital artists, computer scientists working with computer graphics, multimedia, networking, interfaces and other “cultural” parts of computer science (as opposed to, say, chip design or computer architecture) are true formalists – that is, they are investigating new possibilities for representation, social and human-machine communication. Like software artists, these computer scientists routinely translate their ideas into various working demos and prototypes which often do not have life outside of their own professional domain: academic papers, conferences, demo presentations. (However, in contrast to the works of digital artists, some of these ideas do enter into mainstream computing and thus have huge impact on culture: think of GUI, hyperlinking, or World Wide Web).

At the end of the day, if new media artists want their efforts to have a significant impact on cultural evolution, they indeed to generate not only brilliant images or sounds but more importantly, solid discourse. That is, they need to situate their works in relation to ideas that are not only about the techniques of making these

works. The reason that we continue discussing Duchamp's urinal or as Paik's early TV sculptures as though these works were created today has nothing to do with the artistic and technological skills of these artists – it has to do with their concepts, i.e. the discursive statements these artists were making through their objects. In short, if modern and contemporary art is a particular discourse (or a game) where the statements (or moves) are made via particular kind of material objects identified as "artworks," digital artists need to treat their works as such statements if they are to enter the larger cultural conversation. This means referring to the historical and presently circulating statements in the fields of contemporary art and/or contemporary culture at large. And while Ars Electronica 2003 festival organizers seem to understand this – "A media art that is coherently and consistently conceived will never be limited to the artistic use of technical media" (Gerfried Stocker, statement in the 2003 Festival Program, p. 7) – the festival itself, in my view, did not encourage the real dialogue between new media art and contemporary art, simply because it did not include anybody from the latter field.

If brilliant computer images are not supported by equally brilliant cultural ideas, their life span is very limited. Either they are destined to be simply forgotten, the way it happened with the great deal of media art – simply because the software and the hardware they required to run on no longer exists. Alternatively – and it hard to say which fate is worse – they would end up as buttons or plug-ins in mainstream graphics and multimedia software. This the ever-present danger of anybody working on the cutting edge of technology – if the results do not become part of other cultural conversations, they inevitably stay within the field of technology itself: either simply erased by new generations of software and hardware, or incorporated within it as elementary building blocks.

In saying all this I don't want to imply that contemporary art is somehow "better" than digital art. Every culture has a need for different discourses, statements, and practices; historically they are distributed across - -varied cultural fields.

Today, for instance, you will find that the development of new styles is mostly done with design; the tradition of portraiture (representation of a particular human being) is primary carried on in commercial photography; literature and cinema have taken on the role representing human existence via narratives, which in classical period was the function of theatre; and so on. Some fields within computer science, the research-oriented wing of designers, and digital art are playing their own unique and extremely important role: devising new representational and communication methods and techniques. As for contemporary art, it does not actually have a well-defined role within this cultural division of labor. Rather, it is a field there one can make statements which are not possible to make in all any other field, be it science, media, etc. These statements are unique in terms of their subject matter, how they are arrived at, and how they are presented. Not every contemporary artist fully takes advantage of this unique situation, but the best do.

While the fields of contemporary art and digital art play very different roles and both are culturally important for different reasons, they are also are both limited in a complementary way. If the two fields can learn from each other, the results can be very exciting. Contemporary art is too historical: a typical statement in this field either by artist or by critic inevitably refers to another statement or statements made during the last few decades in the field. Digital art has the opposite illness: it has no memory of its own history, so it can benefit from remembering its past more systematically.

To conclude: this brief analysis was not meant as attack on the whole fields of “digital art” or “software art.” Its best practitioners are concerned with larger social and political questions. Moreover, the best works of digital art are able to find just the right balance between the strong concept that is not inherently technological and the attention to software medium (I am thinking of such classics as Carnivore and Auto-Illustrator). Others may be more concerned with technological or design issues but, here as well, the best works are making a unique contribution to the

larger dialog: for instance, Ben Fry's visualizations which allow us to see relationships in data and its dynamic development – something which was until now not possible to do in the history of visual representations. Still, others are programmers who do not even consider themselves as artists, which allows them - even though they may not know it - to make genuinely interesting artistic statements (rumme.org recognizes that some of the most interesting activities in "software art" come from the outsiders – in the same way that Shulgin's much earlier "medal for web art" was awarded to web sites which were not done by self-proclaimed artists but displayed "original artistic sensibility." As – the runme.org site states, "Software art is an intersection of two almost non-overlapping realms: software and art…The repository is happy to host different kinds of projects - ranging from found, anonymous software art to famous projects by established artists and programmers.")

What I wanted to critique was not the extremely dynamic and important field of "software art" but the way it was represented by Ars Electronica 2003 festival. Its paradigm can only be described as cultural isolationism. This is a dangerous position to take. Today, when pretty much every artist and cultural producer is widely using computers while also typically being motivated by many other themes and discourses, is it in fact possible that "digital art" happens everywhere else but not within the spaces of Ars Electronica festival?

LINKS:
www.aec.at/en/festival/
www.transmediale.de/
www.runme.org
www.m-cult.org/read_me/
www.abstraction-now.net
www.zkm.de/futurecinema/