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As well as a vast array of exhibitions, talks, and networking opportunities, the 12th International Symposium on Electronic Arts (ISEA) featured a three-day trip on a cruise liner. Armin Medosch gives us an inside-outsider's account of his voyage into the depths of new media art

On Sunday 15 August 2004 at around lunchtime people start to gather at the Silja Line Terminal in Helsinki. The ISEA cruise on the commercial cruise ship Silja Opera is soon to begin.<sup>1</sup> While many people still queue for their tickets, a group called Abflug plays music from a laptop in the departure lounge. On this art cruise it is not enough, of course, to just sit around and wait, the waiting has to be embellished with art. The 'Wireless Experience' has started already.<sup>2</sup> I open my laptop and begin to write this report. Because of my personal history my anticipation is tinged with discomfort. From 1991 to 1994 I was involved with getting the project Stubnitz Art-Space-Ship going. A small group of artists, we had bought an 80 metre long East German fishing trawler and converted it into an interdisciplinary laboratory for art, science and technology. Stubnitz was linked into the emerging networks of electronic culture, but the main point of the project was autonomy, creating a self-sufficient and self-defined structure. In summer 1994, during our Baltic Tour, Stubnitz made a splash in St Petersburg, Malmö and Hamburg. We were expected to bring the Stubnitz to Helsinki that year, where ISEA 1994 took place, but we did not make it, our financial resources were already exhausted. In autumn 1994 the project went bankrupt. My heart broke and probably never fully recovered.<sup>3</sup> We have boarded the ship, found the way to our cabins, discovered with whom we are sharing. Now we are waiting for the cruise to begin on the 'Riviera Pool' deck – the one with the swimming pool, jacuzzi, potted palm trees and removable glass roof. There is a buzz of expectation, the joy of people coming together from different parts of the world and recognising each other with shouts and hugs and kisses. Tapio, Mare and Amanda make short speeches and get warm applause, then DJ Mukul starts to drop some beats.<sup>4</sup> Quite a few people are already drinking, and the atmosphere is thick with chatter, cigarette smoke and heavy basslines. But the weather is not good, it has started raining and the rain is pouring down harder and harder as the Silja Opera leaves the port of Helsinki. The glass roof leaking, water is coming down so heavily that the buckets provided to collect it cut a helpless figure. A sense of gloom sets in. But then, just an hour outside Helsinki, the sky clears up, we sail westwards under full steam and all is good again. It is possible to think about this ship as a great occasion, an opportunity for 800-plus people from almost all over the world to come together for two days and nights to play and listen to music, watch digital videos, explore installations and locative media art work, and above all, to talk, to network, discuss ideas, breed projects, enter a great multi-threaded discussion between shifting group configurations and in the process, clarify things, move the discourse further, evolve a critical group consciousness which will inform and inspire others.<sup>5</sup> In this sense these annual or biannual 'class meetings' do probably work. What is less clear is which inclusion/exclusion mechanisms are at work, not so much via the 'curating' of the event but in the self-selection of those who would want to or can afford to participate: Putting everyone together on a boat can only heighten that sense of insider-/outsiderishness, the demarcation line between the imaginary 'we' and others.<sup>6</sup>

As the white and blue hull of the proud Silja Opera divides the waves with confidence, the 'touristic situation' makes me inevitably think of other types of ships in other places and at other times: the European ships that started exploring the oceans of the world and discovered 'new' continents – new to us, Europeans – and started to conquer, kill, steal, a process that will later be called globalisation and the stealing officially sanctioned as free trade, something that is very much still going on and

which, by its very nature, makes the poor countries poorer, so desperately poor that many inhabitants of those countries try to travel to the rich countries, risking their lives on small dinghies or crammed onto rusty freighters. While the victims of European border defence are 'polluting' the waters of the Mediterranean how can I not take offence at the fancy decorations of the Silja Opera, its many mirrors on which elegant ladies in 1920s robes have been painted. The Metropolis bar is a Las Vegas style entertainment lounge, the walls of the restaurants adorned by paintings of 1920s decadence showing black women dancing before the eyes of an elegant white crowd, an age when the fruits of imperialism were consumed maybe more unashamedly than today, or were they?

The environment on this ship invites us to consume, to consume more, and to consume again, creating circumstances which conspire to hide the existence of another ship, right under our feet and around us, the ship of the engineers and deckhands, the kitchen and bar staff and the cleaners who silently clean up our mess while we sleep off our hangovers.<sup>7</sup> On luxury liners like the Queen Elizabeth in a not too distant past staff had to use a special corridor so that they could move around the ship without their 'dirty' presence being noticed by the elegant society dining upstairs (people who are likely to have looked like those painted on the restaurants walls). This corridor was called the Burma Road because it was as hot as the South East Asian jungle. Has the Silja Opera also got its 'Burma Road'? This separation of labour manifest in the spatial layout of the ship evokes the image of another ship, the one in Julio Cortazar's novel *The Winners*, where a group of people have won a luxury cruise. After the boat has left the harbour they find themselves held captive in a small subsection of it. Anxiety and bemusement soon turn to fear as they discover they are in fact prisoners on the ship, victims of a weird right-wing conspiracy.

Borrowing this metaphor, one could think of us as hostages of our governments who are waging war in the name of freedom. In the same way we are passengers, whether we like it or not, on board a vessel called 'Western Civilisation' whose progress contains a negative dialectic between the development of an idea of freedom, secularisation and techno-scientific discovery on one hand, and, on the other, the worst excesses of genocidal colonialism facilitating European geographic expansion.<sup>8</sup> This abuse of instrumental power, of the rational control of nature, is written into the genealogy of the Scientific Revolution from its inception. Cartesianism, geometry, telescopes, nautical instruments, coordinates and the Mercator projection are inextricably linked with the global projection of force, with mercantile Empire building and Colonial map-making.<sup>9</sup> Following the trope of 'unlimited expansion of rational mastery', we have created, among other things, the atom bomb and the satellite, which provide a gigantic potential for death, destruction and social control.<sup>10</sup> Since at least the 1950s critical Cassandras have warned that technology has become autonomous, that its development cannot be influenced by anyone anymore, which inevitably leads to the question of the ethical dimension of techno-scientific progress.<sup>11</sup>

As the results of this process are the very tools of the trade for an electronic or media arts community like the one travelling on the ISEA Love Boat, it cannot shy away from dealing with these ethical questions. But ethics are not fashionable, not like wearable computers for instance.<sup>12</sup> ISEA 2004 offered bits and pieces of this discussion across a number of conference panels, but it was more of a subterranean thread. Some contributions, such as Anne Nigten of V2's inspiring, self-critical presentation, aimed at 'unravelling the tale' of global domination through scientific superiority.<sup>13</sup> Yet there is still a lot to do in unmasking the mystifications of the techno-determinism on which the media arts scene is hooked like a drug. Right now, when the world is swamped with new mobile phones and other gadgets, no one is talking about the ideological content of the things which insert themselves into the social fabric and, potentially, further the usurpation of the social by market forces. One wonders if this apolitical attitude is systemic, like a permanent viral infection, and if the field as a whole is not complicit in carrying forward the techno-deterministic saga, constructing discourses that aestheticise and romanticise the expansion of rational mastery and capitalist growth?

The self-constructed version of this tale, of course, is different. We, who are travelling on this ship, are trying to use the very same ‘science’ for the benefit of the people. We are here to conceive counter-strategies, form ‘translocal networks of resistance’ and transform the tools of projection of power into poetic engines of reflection. At least within our community we have overcome divisions of class, race and gender; alliances between intellectuals from Europe (East and West), Asia and Africa have been developing for quite a while and we are here to deepen and expand them. Among us are sharp feminist and Marxist critics of technoscience who, following in the footsteps of Kuhn, Feyerabend and Haraway, are slicing up the big white whale of technoscience into mouthy pieces of science sashimi (served on satellite dishes, courtesy Makrolab). Both on this boat and more generally in our intellectual and artistic voyages, our journey is not without support from this society. We have been sent by the academic institutions of nation states and by arts funding institutions with fancy names and grand project titles. It is part and parcel of our job to study these things, to enlighten and to explain. Our tactics, strategies, text collages and aesthetics are designed for intervention, mirroring, reflection, giving witness: it is not all black and white down there in the particle accelerator tunnel. This is the story that we bought into when we signed the cheques for this journey.

As the ship leaves Stockholm towards Tallinn I am sitting on deck five at the rear end of the ship, officially called the ‘open deck’ sound system. DJ Mukul is playing some exquisitely tasty tunes like that cover version of the Pink Panther theme song which perfectly suits the situation. I watch with some amazement the outbreak of libido amongst hardened techno-intellectuals frolicking in the jacuzzis and drinking champagne. I would not want to be seen as a moralist or a hypocrite (I am holding a vodka sea breeze in my left hand and a cigarette in the right and I am enjoying it) but as more guests join the jacuzzi fun, encouraged by Sara Diamond’s Martini cocktail party, I walk away disapprovingly. What is this media arts scene about then? Escapism? Are we going anywhere, or are we just drifting? Is there anyone still at the helm of this ship? The well known accusations about the self-reflexive nature of media arts discourse, of media art living in its own ghetto, in a comfortable sort of bubble, are not going away.<sup>14</sup> The suspicion grows, watching the circus travel from station to station, from Transmediale to Futuresonica to ISEA, that the notion of ‘new’ in new media allows us to continue in some state of historical amnesia, hopping from one theme to the next. What comes after the wireless-generative-locative hyperventilation? It appears to me that the real developments are dictated by successive commercial and technical ‘revolutions’ and media art just surfs on those waves. It is all the more important that specific histories are unearthed,<sup>15</sup> and that media art gets its relation to the ICT sector and the ‘creative industries’ sorted out.<sup>16</sup> Many things are fine as long as they are clearly labelled and seen as design, scientific study, experiment maybe, but not necessarily as Art, which is often difficult to find among the screens and monitors.<sup>17</sup> The more organised ignorance on the institutional level allows all this to continue and in the process facilitates the growth of a market of media arts festivals, academic courses, residencies, commissions. A little bit of Luhmann’s social system science would not hurt and might help to explain how the content of a festival is often the result of institutional relationships and the structure of funding programmes rather than the critical engagement of ‘curators’ or event organisers with issues of our times.<sup>18</sup>

Some voices then go to the other extreme and say that media arts have failed to create any solid foundations and that this is the cause of the apparent lack in progress. I think it is necessary to remain sceptical about such claims. It is true that the wheel gets reinvented all the time, that we had better ‘multimedia’ in 1993 in some aspects than in 2004. At the same time actual change can be noticed as we have to respond to different challenges all the time – contextually, socially, politically. Making good work is hard and requires, besides imagination, craft, skill and endurance. Maybe we are going through a phase of preparation, of building up some stock, a time of ‘breathing in’ rather than creating terrific ‘art’.<sup>19</sup> Once this grassroots development of decentralised knowledge production in a copyleft framework gathers enough momentum, with tools, libraries, procedures and associated forms sorted out, exciting new work will emerge and we can leave the ‘imaginary futures’ of the past behind once

and for all.**20** I am about to catch a cold (and a depression) if I stay much longer on the ‘open sound’ deck. Moving away from the wet bodies in the bathtub, I retreat to my cabin. My sleep is filled with weird dreams and anxieties: ships crashing into each other; sunken Soviet submarines on the Baltic seabed with the corpses of dead seamen and nuclear missiles still inside. I get up early and see the medieval towers of Tallinn rising from the mist. The hardcore party revellers are sleeping on the tables of the restaurant, next to the lavish buffets which are constantly refilled. a