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The Art - Place - Technology International Symposium on Curating New Media Art took place at The School of Art and Design and FACT in Liverpool 30 March - 1 April 2006. This post on the CRUMB mailing list reviews a selection of the conference presentations and also mentions Mute

Dear crumb list,

I hope that this post about the Art-Place-Technology conference does not interrupt the flow of the current discussion on this list. I should also say that I missed some presentation in the beginning of the event. Here it goes:

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In Liverpool two weeks ago, a conference revolved around media art curating. With its eleven speakers Art-Place-Technology was a small, focused event that took place in the classic wooden auditorium with tall windows at John Moores University, just one block away from Condoleeza Rice's temporary residence. The tumult of the protesters caused by the visit of the US Secretary of State made up the background sound to some of the event.

<<http://www.a-r-c.org.uk/liverpool/ocs/programme.php>>

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4862846.stm>>

Amanda McDonald Crowley started the event refusing to be categorized as a curator. "I'm making situations!" she said. Amanda investigated the role of collaboration in curatorial practice asking if it merely constitutes compromise. Like in the arts at large also in new media, some curators strive to be artists. A deep voice out of the auditorium added the work of Hans Ulrich Obrist as example of this type of curatorial approach in which artists merely become invisible, creative laborers who support the vision of a conceptual director. Amanda also raised the question if workers in the culture industry with its corporate, institutionalized funding dynamics now become new media apparatchiks. Amanda reported that Eyebeam has moved to a focus on media art production workshops and educational programs rather in opposition to being a collecting museum.

<http://www.eyebeam.org/disclaim_800.html>

Charlie Gere linked Derrida's idea of hospitality to the varying degrees with which new media art, and net art in particular, is welcomed into traditional art institutions. Will the guest ever become a permanent resident? Charlie asserted that net art lives parasitically and certainly marginalized in these art contexts. It eats off its resources without contributing to the host's well being. He argued that the longer net art lives in this type of existence in the gallery, the more it will blend into this environment. He referred to similarities to early video art. Charlie emphatically demanded rules for the authoritative evaluation of media art. What would a set of criteria for quality of a media art project look like? The discussion that followed pondered where is this desire for straight rules originates? Why do we need to have clear guidelines for what is good or bad? Is life unbearable in the face of the ambivalence and pluralistic sea of voices and opinions? Or, as some conference participants questioned, is this drive for the ten rules of good media art based on the desire for authoritative curatorial or interpretive power over institutional inclusion and exclusion?

<<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/cultres/staff/gere.php>>

Throughout the discussion the marginal role of media art curators in museums was bemoaned. The Whitney Museum of American barely gives a desk to their adjunct media art curator. Equivalent jobs at the Tate in London with its amazing online archive of talks and discussions are also rather peripheral in their position within the institution.

Simon Worthington of MetaMute.org posed that "participation is the core theme of restructuring a cultural organization." The Metamute crew was inspired by the Open Source Software for constituency relationship management (CRM) used by Howard Dean in his election campaign. Simon talked about ways in which Metamute steers toward web2print-on-demand (web2pod). Here one can print just a few copies of a book at reasonable prices. The issue of participation in metamute raised a few questions.

Why would writers upload their texts to metamute without getting paid, for example? What about the hierarchy of exchange that is created in which contributors to Metamute, uploading to their site, significantly boost the cultural capital of those who run the site without gaining much themselves.

<<http://www.metamute.org/node/7017>>

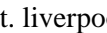
<<http://metamute.org/>>

Inke Arns questioned the strategic usefulness of the term new media art. Just by calling it media art and by fore-grounding technical minutiae of art projects potential visitors to her institution may stay home. Perhaps, she argued, simply talking of art or defining artwork according to the way they behave would be more productive. Inke reflected on the growing discontent with the notion of media art. Media art cannot be defined merely in technical terms she said. She called for an open-minded approach to a field of practice that is largely invisible in arts institutions. At the same time Inke reinforced the importance to insist on much of new media work as art. Stephen Kovats proposed an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond traditional curatorial practice. For Stephen, the unstable, procedural properties of today's media call for a stealth rather than a fixed attitude. As an example he showed Moholy Nagy 1926 project *Licht - Raum Modulator*; and asserted the complete misunderstanding of the work demonstrated by its display in museums. Curators frequently mistake the apparatus that creates the work with the piece itself. Steven asserted that Nagy's artwork is not the artistic tool itself and that putting this on display comes close to understanding a programmer's algorithms printed out on paper as the functioning software itself.

<<http://www.hmkv.de/>>

<<http://www.v2.nl/>>

<<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/werke/licht-raum-modulator/>>

Sarah Cook introduced the work of Crumb and facilitated discussion groups, which she focused on themes that were overlooked or under-examined during the event.  She also introduced useful quotes on the topic of collaboration such as Simon Pope's "collaboration and open source cultures can be very competitive: don't try to bankrupt the person you are giving the gift to" Sarah's workshop crystallized several questions. Charlie, for instance, pushed for a clear standard of quality in new media that could be applied across the board at least as a discussion starter. He bemoaned the postmodern everything goes plurality of approaches. However, this question of quality or even classifications in art and non-art raised eyebrows. Another topical orientation was that of utopian associations that are immediately associated with digital artwork and social networks and cooperative structures in particular. Right away references to 1968 emerge.

<<http://www.crumbweb.org/>>

In my presentation I proposed an online repository for experiences with collaborative and cooperative processes such as event organization, the production of art projects, collaborative writing, and more.

download presentation <http://molodiez.org/ts_liverpool0406.pdf>

People work together forever but where is the inventory of what they learned? I also proposed a manual for collaboration in the form of a list that can serve as guideline for working together. Surely, collaboration is not something we do after having had coffee in the morning, it is a sticky, muddy affair. But nevertheless, an ABC's of Collaboration and an examination of the properties of collaboration is important. As the term of collaboration is polluted for many, I suggested a differentiation in cooperation and collaboration and within that trajectory I argued for free cooperation as suggested by Christoph Spehr. I talked about the tragedy of the social new media event machine pointing to problems like the reign of affect over content, a common lack of topical focus and diversity of speakers. Additional problems include the simultaneity of sessions at events that drives speakers into the competition over audiences. I continued to present a typology of event formats also formulating a critique of paperism and panelism. I called for a theory of the social event machine. Such theory would also address event economies. In the face of wide-spread resource scarcity I proposed the term of extreme sharing networks and delineated their potential: a politics of inspiration. The issue of the virtualization of conferences (Broeckman) led me to questions of participation online and off. This is often overlooked when cultural workers open room online (i.e. mailinglists, participatory artworks, etc). What motivates people to participate in an online environment? At the conference some people suggested that online, compared to physical exhibitions, there is no such thing as an audience. In the WWW everybody is supposed to be a participant. But the potential user/producer is at least occasionally just a viewer. There are many who enjoy their double life as authors and lurkers and again others are -and will remain- exclusively viewers. The discussion about curating media art led to exchanges about the role of cultural web-based repositories and the role of the curated website. Who ever visits them beyond a small number of experts? Do people go to these archives to experience art? In relation to the role of the curator I pointed out that there is an emerging phenomenon that I called the cultural context provider. Two characteristics shape the ccp. 1) Cultural workers produce contexts into which others input their content. 2) Artists curate, write, and produce artworks. Christiane Paul also addressed this issue. Today, cultural workers often define themselves strategically depending on funding contexts. Some of it may even relate to life style choices. Today, you may get a grant for being a curator, tomorrow your nearby institution may be willing to pay for a technician, or an artist, or theorist. Cultural identity becomes strategic.

Evident throughout the discussions was a fairly narrow focus on several pioneering individuals who curated shows in the field. The clear and present danger is that of a further ghettoization of media art in which friends and friends of friends visualize their networks of friends in exhibitions and catalogues. Perhaps the unstable, floating character of the field causes a desperate hierarchization in which two or three trustworthy individuals become masters of expertise in an ocean of perceived untested maybes or wannabes. The establishment of a canon is at stake (as problematic as that is). Curators try to be the ones who bring out particular artists. There is nothing wrong with that but in new media it causes a narrow focus of many curators who attach themselves to two or three artists who are "tested and true" and may become part of a canon. And they want to be the ones who emerge with them. The pressure is on if there are only two or three jobs worldwide for major media art curators. For video it took about forty years to become a bit more center stage in the museum. But possibly the underlying assumption is wrong in the first place.

Perhaps emergent digital aesthetics need new venues outside of the establishments of the art world. The dance club. The community center. Much of the discussion at the conference was focused on curating media art in the blue ship gallery or museum. Perhaps this is where the problem starts. What about alternative, new venues, not to talk of autonomous spaces or initiatives? Is the struggle over new media art just a fight for recognition in the blue ship art establishment? For all one knows the battle should rather focus on getting new media art out of the white cube and into other cultural spheres.

It is vitally important not to get stuck in small circle discussions that entirely focus on curating media art. I am also always amazed how even in new media circles with all their distributed research, discussions are still predominantly referential to national discourses. It sometimes feels like the global networks still spin only special interest nests, "cyberarchipelagos". While an expertise in this area is important it is equally pertinent to keep an open mind and include discourses and people who do not directly relate, who are not part of the circulus of a small network. Art-Place-Technology conference was spearheaded by the curators Iliyana Nedkova and Chris Byrne who took that into consideration when they focused the event on interdisciplinarity. They facilitated this event with the a large cadre of supporters at John Moores while at the same time raising their small child that was present during some of the presentations. The cross-disciplinary approach of Chris and Iliyana was reflected, for example, in the invitation of people who are not in fact new media art curators but rather come to the topics from an odd topical angle.

At night, after a few unavoidable pints at the pub and a performance at Liverpool's new media center FACT, going back to my hotel room through the empty, wet streets of Liverpool, a well-dressed, middle-aged man walks in front of me. Over his shoulder he carries a large black and white anarchy flag. The next conference on media art (curating) could look closer at bringing media art into alternative, non-institutional contexts, out of the white box of the museum.

<<http://www.fact.co.uk/>>

On the backcover of Oliver Grau's book "Virtual Art" Friedrich Kittler writes that "The highly ambitious task of locating the latest image technologiis within a wider art-historical context has now been accomplished." This authoritative German spirit is exactly not what the discussion about new media art and curating needs. This discourse should remain an open discussion to which many voices add their wide range of perspectives and international positions. The discourse around new media does not need a cult following of a handful of leaders. It needs a wide spectrum of voices adding to that scary creature emerging out of the sea. We don't yet know what it will look like.

-Trebor Scholz

<<http://collectivate.net/journalisms/2006/4/11/curating-new-media-art.html>>

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