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"It's contemporary art, stupid" Curating computer based art out of the ghetto

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The following text was written in collaboration and it emanates from ongoing discussions we have had in the past year since meeting at the Read_me festival in Aarhus, Denmark, last August. Our discussions have focused on what influence curating and the discourse surrounding it has on the relationship between computer based art and contemporary art in general. We both felt that the two fields were too separate and that some kind of mediation between them was needed. We do not see this text as a conclusion to our discussions but rather as an open invitation to further discussion and mediation.

Centralized vs. Decentralized/Distributed (Control, nevertheless)

In the conference „Curating. Immateriality. Systems“,¹ which took place at Tate Modern in London in early June 2005 there seemed to be a reluctance to the term „curating“ while at the same time there was an almost desperate wish to claim it for new online practices. The reluctance towards the term originated in the assumption that, according to the conference announcement, traditional curating corresponds to a centralized network model which is equal to curatorial control. Correspondingly, it was suggested that „progressive“ forms of curating follow a distributed network model, which does not allow any central curatorial control.

This opposition recalls Paul Baran's model of centralized, decentralized and distributed networks developed in 1964 in order to show the special structure of the Internet then about to be developed.²

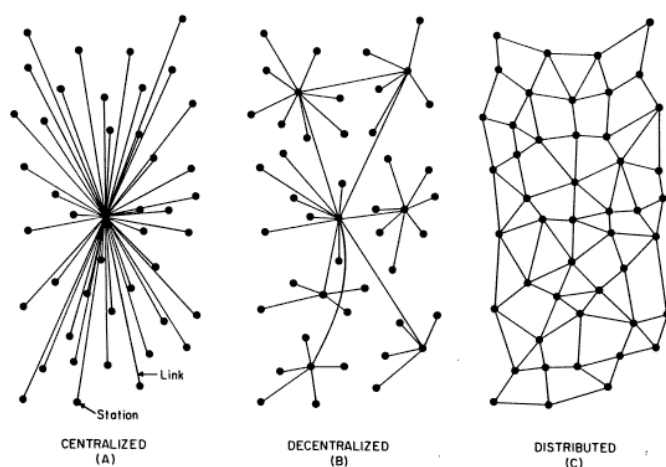


FIG. 1 – Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks

¹ Joasia Krysa organized the conference in collaboration with Tate Modern.

² While in its initial phase the Internet resembled a genuinely distributed network, it came to resemble a rather decentralized network („backbones“ with „bandwidth“) with it gradually growing and becoming increasingly commercialized in the 1990s.

We think that the assumptions made by the „Curating. Immateriality. Systems“ conference need to be seriously questioned.

First of all, they seem to suggest that with digital media, there is a significant development possible: from centralized to distributed curating practices. This belief in progress seems to be rather modernistic. Digital art is not necessarily equal to progressive models of curatorship.

Secondly, equating the position of the curator with a closed system exerting centralized curatorial control (the centralized network model in Baran's scheme) somewhat clings to a 19th century view of the artist as a genius who is creating masterpieces isolated from the world in his studio. Describing the institution of the curator in this way is telling, in that it witnesses a stereotypical view of art institutions which seems to be borne by a genuine anti-institutional impulse/ anti-authoritarian discourse. This position seems not to have taken into consideration that the institution itself has changed, if not radically, then at least gradually.

And *thirdly*, one does not necessarily have to look at new forms of net (activist) art, software art or generative art to find unusual models of shared and distributed curatorship. The most recent examples in the context of contemporary visual arts are the exhibition „Collective Creativity“³ (on collective practices and group enjoyment) by the Zagreb-based curators' collective WHW currently on display in Kassel, the exhibition „On Difference“ at the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart⁴ curated by a distributed network of artists and curators, the „East Art Map“⁵ initiated in 2002 by the Slovenian artists' collective Irwin (NSK) and Jochen Gerz's „Anthology of Art“⁶ which was developed online between 2001 and 2002. All these alternative, or distributed forms of curatorial models have developed in the field of contemporary visual art.

As in the past few years we have seen some very interesting developments, like, e.g., the runme software art repository⁷, it is indeed interesting, and legitimate, to look for new curatorial models in the context of digital media – but it would be a mistake to believe that only in this (rather narrow) segment of contemporary art one could find ‚progressive‘ models of curatorial practice.

Three current curatorial tendencies

We see three general tendencies in the field of curating computer-based art. First, there is the institutionalized curating represented by for instance Christiane Paul at the Whitney Museum of American Art. There are and have been other high profile figures and events within this tendency not least Steve Dietz at the Walker Center of the Arts and the exhibition “010101” at the San Francisco MoMA but at the moment Paul is the most prominent one. As her title – Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts – indicates, she acts as part of the regular curator team at the museum on level with

³ www.fridericianum-kassel.de/ausst/ausst-kollektiv.html#interfunktionen_english

⁴ www.wkv-stuttgart.de

⁵ www.eastartmap.org

⁶ www.anthology-of-art.net

⁷ <http://runme.org>

the curator of other (old) media. Her position as a traditional (one-woman) curator allows her to present digital art/computer based art within the established art institution and through that create a closer relationship between computer based art and the history, theory and practices of non-computer based art; and she has done so with a number of recognized shows – “Data Dynamics” (2001) and “CODEDOC” (2002), although the latter was a rather specialized show that focused on the formal and conceptual aspects of code. While Paul has also made computer based art an integral and recurring part of the Whitney Biennale, her main focus and most inspired work is online presentation/production. However, despite the fact that more and more visitors consult the museum’s website the website remains a marginal space – discursively as well as practically – within the museum context; it is primarily a space for finding information, not for experiencing art. This ambiguous ‘status’ of being part of and separated from the institution at the same time – being met with curiosity and reservations in equal measures as the new kid on the block – seems to be symptomatic of the current state of affairs for this tendency. Good intentions are expressed and concrete initiatives are taken by the institution to integrate computer based art but somehow the process of following through seems to run out of energy very quickly and stop halfway; Steve Dietz was fired from the Walker, the San Francisco MoMA has not shown computer based art since “010101”, while both the Guggenheim and New York MoMA have closed their online museums. Of course, it also took a long time for photography and video to become part of the institution but the institution should have learned from its former ‘slowness’ and opened up since then.

The second tendency is also institutionalized but within a context that deals more or less exclusively with computer based art. Especially influential are long-running festivals like the transmediale in Berlin and the Ars Electronica in Linz that both include a theme specific exhibition (usually in physical space) as well as a competition between a number of works usually from an open call list. Whereas a curator (team) from the institution selects the works for the exhibition, an appointed (international) jury selects the works for the competition. Included in this tendency are also spaces and organizations that have made computer based art their field of interest, like the Electrohype in Malmö, ZKM in Karlsruhe and V2 in Rotterdam. The curatorial formats and strategies used within this tendency are traditional in the sense that they to a large extent resemble those found in institutions of the first tendency. However, the relation to those institutions seems to be ambivalent: the institutions of the second tendency wants to be recognized as established institutions like the institutions of the first tendency at the same time as they criticize that framework because they are disappointed that the institutions of the first tendency have not realized that computer based art is a/the new happening art form and that it demands serious attention like other contemporary art forms. Thus, the institutions of the second tendency are caught between ambitions to be included ‘equal’ to the institutions of the first tendency and insistence on being themselves. They enjoy enormous support within the computer based art world and are able to generate substantial growth but the contact with and interest from the non-computer based art world seems to minimize year by year as if it was inversely proportional to that very same growth.

The third tendency is the curatorial formats and strategies found in organizations, groupings and platforms based primarily on the net, like the runme, rhizome and Eyebeam. The attitude in this tendency is that computer based art should be

presented outside the white cube (preferably online) and that it demands new and more democratic approaches to curating. The figure of the single permanently affiliated curator is abandoned and replaced by a diversity of non-hierarchical and multi-person curatorships; on rhizome for instance every member can curate his or her own show with works from the data base and on reBlog the curator changes with a frequency of a month. Rephrasing Beuys: Everyone can be a curator. Curating is not (necessarily) an activity that these organizations, groupings and platforms practice themselves but an activity they make available for the users. They dissociate themselves from the established institutions of the first two tendencies – conceptually, ideologically and structurally – and they have no ambitions of being recognized by these institutions (although rhizome is closely connected to The New Museum its understanding of curating is still the flat distributed model which is made evident by the fact that the executive director Rachel Greene does not do any curating on the website). On the contrary, they seem to thrive on their independence and explore the possibilities of curating in direct opposition to traditions and conventions. While this tendency certainly has generated refreshing alternative approaches to curating it has also contributed to an increasing separation. Curating computer based art is presented/positioned as being basically different from curating non-computer based art, which implicitly equals saying that computer based art is basically different from non-computer based art.

The three tendencies described above do not exactly leave us with curatorial pro(s)pe(ri)ties. On the contrary, they render visible that both within the computer based art world and the non-computer based art forces are working against an integration of the two worlds that actually both would benefit from. We believe that a negotiation or mediation is needed and any kind of curatorial formalism or orthodoxy is to be avoided. This text is an attempt to initiate such mediation. Or in other words, we see ourselves as mediators.

„Curatorial statement“ instead of „curatorial control“

Curating is a term that becomes increasingly blurred in discussions like the one at Tate Modern. We have ambivalent feelings about talking about curating computer based art. On the one hand, we feel that the term is not applied with sufficient specificity and on the other hand we feel that there is no such specific thing as curating computer based art. There is just curating art. Of course, computer based art involves new formats and offers new possibilities for curating but we believe that the discursive role of the curator nevertheless remains the same: To make a statement that explores the art in question and finds new ways of thinking about it and the context it refers to by putting it in a larger cultural or theoretical context. This is how we understand curating. We are aware that it is a somewhat purist stance that may seem reactionary or anachronistic to some but it reflects a forward-looking intention to protect curating from ‘inflation’ in the sense that it comes to refer to any kind of activity involving the presentation of computer based art online. We think that by being more specific about curating – as a discursive practice – we also increase its relevance on a general level and are able to take advantage of the specific curatorial formats and possibilities in computer based art.

We believe in the democratization of curating in the sense that not only persons appointed by institutions can act as curators; that curating should be informed by

principles of transparency and horizontal discourse; but at the same time we believe that curator is a title you earn, not a title you take.

Our understanding of curating is different from what is happening at rhizome and runme for instance. We do not discard these activities – on the contrary, we want them to inform future curating – but for the sake of clarity we believe we should call them something else depending on the kind of activity.

Is the term „curating“ really appropriate for describing genuinely new forms of online practice? Why call it curating at all? Why not be more specific and call these activities editing, moderating, collaborative filtering? They have more in common with these kinds of activities than with traditional curating.

What is the value of talking about a curatorial structure alone (there is no per se „bad“ or „good“ structure)? Isn't it much more interesting to talk about structures in relation to specific projects and to specific topics (and, indeed, as was suggested by Andreas Broeckmann, in relation to specific economic situations)? And to ask, what can the structure contribute to the project, rather than asking what the project can contribute to the structure⁸?

Making an open forum for the presentation of works is not curating; neither is filtering the best works from an open call nor making a private collection of links to computer based art works. It is collecting and while it expresses the aesthetic taste and orientation of the person it says nothing (new) about the works. Instead of placing the works in a discursive public field, collecting withdraws the works from this field and places them in a private sphere where they are no longer up for discussion; they are already history, private and not public. With a good sense of pop-provocative humor Anne-Marie Schleiner has proposed a new type of curator that connects to this – the “Future Filter Feeder” (FFF).⁹ Schleiner’s new curator type is more like an artist – “I want to glue the two heads of the artist and the curator back onto the same body” – who curates independently from any institution through a diversity of activities. S/he is a floating/nomadic figure who surfs the web, find things/information that s/he likes and presents them in his web log or in fora outside the institution, usually online. Just like the old curator type the FFF makes a selection of ‘works’ but with two major differences: The FFF tends to want to draw more attention to himself – actually like a lot of curators in the contemporary art world – than to the works (that’s how the blog community has developed), not create discussion; the new type expresses (him-/herself) instead of addressing certain topics. While the FFF might seem progressive in terms of breaking away from the institution, challenging its authority and exclusivity, it seems to be based on a romantic idea of the individual as the ultimate rebel and freedom fighter. Or in other words, Schleiner replaces the institutional curator with the individualized curator, and by doing that she partly depoliticizes curating – and art – in the sense that curating becomes a question of personal expression not public discussion, partly reduces the space in which computer based art operates to a homogeneous series of individualistic areas, not a collective field made up of heterogeneous forces.

⁸ „Don't ask what Europe can do for you; ask what you can do for Europe!“, motto of the 3rd Manifesta in Ljubljana, 2000, <http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta3/statement.htm>

⁹ Anne Marie Schleiner, Fluidities and Oppositions among Curators, Filter Feeders, and Future Artists, in: *intelligent agent* vol. 3 no. 1, http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol3_No1_curation_schleiner.html

Good Freedom vs. Bad Control

As mentioned in the beginning, at the conference at Tate Modern the reluctance towards the term „curating“ did not prevent the initiators and organizers from desperately wishing to claim it for new online practices.

The assumption that a decentralized or even a distributed network model allows for ultimate freedom is utterly naive.

Within the ‘digital underground’ there is a widespread reluctance towards and criticism of, if not downright rejection of curating. Curating is associated with institutionalization and central control, power factors that repress the nature of computer based art both in terms of organizational structure, production forms and experience. The mentality is that computer based art originated and developed as a collective distributed art form and that it can only be presented/curated in that way. The same radical and intransigent mentality characterized much of the early net art to the degree that art itself was abandoned. As Vuk Cosic declared with avant-gardistic enthusiasm: “Art was only a substitute for the Internet.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, people like Cosic and especially Shulgin were in fact curating. The “Desktop Is”¹¹ exhibition is a good example.

It lately became fashionable to apply shared, distributed and open network models to almost every field of cultural production. While we clearly see the necessity to emphasize the aspects of openness in culture (against the claims to closure by, e.g. the music industry), we also feel it is necessary to realize the limits of such a view.

Such a view becomes problematic as soon as openness is not merely only observed as a structure of certain phenomena (as a kind of diagnosis), but is handled as a qualitative prerequisite: things have to have open structures in order to be good or positive. Open structures supposedly prevent control and enable freedom – thus the simplifying logic of this view.

When we start discussing „curating“ in these terms, things get complicated. The knee-jerk impulse against anything connected to „center“ or „control“ originates in a culture that favors openness and ultimate freedom. But this ultimate freedom is an illusion, just like complete control is an obsessive thought. Freedom is not necessary good and control is not necessary bad when it comes to curating.

Cathedrals vs. Bazaars, or: why the Linux model cannot be a model for creating art or writing novels (perhaps even curating)

A significant trend is to turn different network models into curatorial models. The network structure of the Internet itself and Paul Baran’s idea of the distributed communication network (opposed to the centralized and decentralized network) is very influential in this regard together with the production forms of the free software culture. We have reservations about turning both into curatorial models.

¹⁰ Tilman Baumgärtel, Art was only a substitute for the Internet. Interview with Vuk Cosic, in: *Telepolis*, June 26, 1997, <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/6/6158/1.html>

¹¹ Desktop Is, 1997-1998, <http://www.easylife.org/desktop/>

Whereas Baran's description of the distributed communication network is inspiring when it comes to rethinking the structures of communication and collaboration it is questionable as a curatorial model. It focuses solely on form, rather than on content, on how curating is done, not what it does; and while the form is certainly important we just believe that it is not everything and it certainly does not guarantee quality. Content should determine the form, not vice versa. Another problem with 'translating' Baran's distributed communication network into a curatorial model is that it does not take into consideration the contextual nature of curating; it describes a closed system of producers not an open dialogue between art works and audience. Curating is not only about internal organization but also about external communication.¹²

It remains undisputed that the open and participatory model along whose lines Linux was developed lead to the best possible result: to the development of an operating system that in some respects is better than Windows. Projects like Linux or the open online encyclopedia Wikipedia are becoming better the more people contribute to them.

Curating, on the other hand, is not about improving the quality of a product, like it is the case with Linux. Curating is about making a qualified statement not through collective production but by anticipating collective participation. Although we believe in curatorial teamwork we also recognize that there is truth in the saying that "too many chefs spoils the food": too many curators blur the statement. An art work can turn the audience into a multitude of producers but that is not the same as a multitude of curators.

This is not to say that by working collectively one cannot achieve interesting artistic results that would not have been possible when working as an individual. Just the opposite is true especially when you look at the practice of collectives such as NSK or other artists' groups. We simply oppose the view that in general, the higher the number of contributors, the better the results get. This might hold true for software de-bugging and projects like Wikipedia, but definitely not for rather subjective activities like writing novels, creating art projects or formulating curatorial statements.¹³

The curatorial statement/curating as statement

Another difference between artistic practices or subjective forms of expression and free software or Wikipedia, is their different modes of functioning: Whereas cultural production like free software production changes reality (by having a direct impact on it), curating changes the perception of reality, including the perception of art, i.e. it creates a new perspective on either the context or the art.¹⁴

¹² Another central question determining the form(at) of curating is that of the audience. Whom do you want to address? Who is he targeted audience? Is there any at all? Or are there only participants? Participants need to be addressed in a different way than an audience.

¹³ However, we would like to stress that we very clearly differentiate between creating art and curating: Curating itself is not an artistic activity (even if it can be part of an art project).

¹⁴ Although sometimes influencing reality can be an essential part of art projects (again, it proves to be difficult to talk about this in general).

Referring to what we wrote earlier, a curatorial statement (which can be developed by one or be many) is essentially a subjective statement, which is precisely what makes it interesting. It is not about collecting as great an amount of opinions in order to create a supposedly „objective“ or encyclopedic view of something, but quite on the contrary, it is rather a very subjective construction of a framework, narrative or context – developed, again, by one or by a collective – that allows projects or artworks to be read in a certain way. This subjective narrative or statement can be related to by others, and should necessarily be criticized. It is not about curatorial control (although, in worst cases it is!) but about starting a dialogue by proposing a certain perspective.

Against isolating computer-based art

As formulated above, much of the discourse surrounding the fundamental attack on curating springs from a very stereotypical image of curating (and institutions) and on a very idealistic image of the freedom of computer based art. Curating is positioned as an activity of the modernist institution dialectically opposed to postmodern energy in computer based art. But although the institution is still a power structure it has become more inclusive and democratic, something that should encourage a more positive approach.

The idea of disconnecting computer-based art from the institution is a discursive dead end. Of course, on a practical level much computer-based art does not need the institution to be presented but conceptually the institution is necessary if the work is to be discussed as art. The question we should ask when dealing with computer based art is not if it is interesting but if it is interesting as art and to be able to answer this we need the histories and theories of the institution. We can challenge and criticize these histories and theories – through computer based art – but we should not reject them completely.

The time of special interest shows is over

The time of special interest shows is over and it is time for computer based art to get out of the ghetto. No doubt that a certain amount of secluded nurturing (promoting and production) served computer based art – from net art to software art – well in the beginning but now it is ready to step onto the scene of contemporary art.

For us as mediators it is not only a question of discussing computer-based art through the non-computer based art but also of anticipating the reverse discussion. Computer based art allows a number of new interesting and relevant perspectives on conceptual art, activism, fluxus, etc., historical as well as theoretical; perspectives that should be explored.

Examples of such integrating projects are, for example the online publication “Medien Kunst Netz”,¹⁵ edited by Dieter Daniels and Rudolf Frieling published in 2004/2005.

¹⁵ <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de>

Especially in the “Overview of media art”¹⁶ containing chapters on topics such as Perception, Art and Politics, Narration, Mass Media and Performance – transcending formal divisions into categories like net art, video art or software art – it proved to be important to provide links to ‚parallel‘ projects from the broader field of contemporary art. Another example for the inclusion of digital and non-digital works was the exhibition „Dispersed Moments of Concentration. Urban and Digital Spaces“ curated in 2005 by Inke Arns at PHOENIX Halle Dortmund.¹⁷ Beyond that, one could also think of an exhibition series establishing dialogues between single works from the field of fluxus or conceptual art and software art or net art, for example. Such a project, as was initially discussed by the team of the Berlin-based net.art database,¹⁸ could be organized in cooperation with a high-profile museum collection of that sort¹⁹. Creating a dialogue of that kind would enrich both digital and non-digital art: For the historical pieces from the collection it would open up an interesting contemporary perspective while at the same time rooting the net art or software art pieces in art history.

If the non-computer based art world hesitates to adopt computer-based art then the computer based art world should respond by starting to adopt non-computer based art. Saying that it does not matter anyway and that it is the non-computer based art world’s own fault – a point of view that was stated at a discussion on this topic during this year’s *transmediale* – is not exactly constructive. But more importantly, it fails to recognize the forces and advantages of the computer based art world; it is more flexible and less hierarchical; it can move faster and spread wider; it allows for collective and processual production on a whole new scale. Instead of practicing these forces and advantages within its own world it should use them to approach the non-computer based art world; turn them into a generous and open gesture.

It is our hope that in the future we will see exhibitions, in which works of computer based art and non-computer based art are placed next to each other. That computer based art and non-computer based art co-exist on the same level – the level of contemporary art – should not be the primary point but the (pre)condition of such exhibitions.

¹⁶ http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/; Inke Arns has worked on the Overview as an editor and has contributed two chapters to the Overview (on „Communication“ and „Society“).

¹⁷ See on this www.hmky.de.

¹⁸ Sakrowski, Thomas Nösler, and others (<http://www.netart-datenbank.org/>).

¹⁹ Currently scheduled for 2006 in the Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund. Especially the high-profile Cremer collection containing fluxus, visual poetry and conceptual art proves to be interesting in this respect.