

Conference Report:

Media Art as Contemporaneity

Discussions based on contemporary productions

Staged by medienwerk.nrw

3 November 2008, Berlin

The one-day conference held in the Federal State Office of North Rhine-Westphalia in Berlin invited interested parties to exchange information and opinions on the thematic and structural transformation of media art as well as on the efficiency and potential improvement of the existing funding structures.

Panel 1: The media arts in the age of their post-medium condition

Discussion on the transformed notion of media art as well as the connection between art production and university training, presentation platforms, and public perception.

The first panel was made up by Prof. Marie-Luise Angerer (Rector, Academy for Media Arts, Cologne) and Dr. Inke Arns (Hardware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund), whose discussion of the question of the media arts in the age of their post-medium condition made clear the complex issues involved in defining the term “media art”. The participants agreed that while contemporary media art encompasses many different technologies, the earlier situation in which the usage of such technologies was seemingly mandatory and often self-referential, they are now applied in such a way as to trigger conceptual and critical examination in regard to the effect exercised on society.

Both discussants identify a development from the “spectacular” to the “casual” as a result of the everyday role media play in people’s lives, with materialities being gradually replaced by medialities. In contrast to the 1990s, people now use the new media as a matter of course. The territory of media art need no longer be demarcated from that of fine art, because the usage of technologies is increasingly widespread in artistic production methods, even if the end product (for instance, a photograph hung on a wall and presented in classical exhibition format) does not necessarily reveal the technological provenance. The discussants agreed that the 1990s definition of media art was over-restrictive, since this field is subject to constant transformation due to the rapid pace of technological advance as well as to the resultant diversity of artistic examinations of these (increasingly mobile) interfaces with digital spaces. Media art – in whatever manifestation and format – has always been distinctive for its critical analysis of technological advances largely driven by economic interests, and will continue to be distinguished by this cultural role. The discussion was moderated by Ulrich Gutmaier (arts journalist, taz Berlin), who ushered in the follow-on panel discussion by asking whether further clarification of the term “media art” was of relevance in regard to funding structures and opportunities.

Panel 2: Funding structures for media art

Discussion of existing structures and the need for sustained, long-term support for media art in the area of tension between low-key project activities and large-scale projects in particular in North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin.

The second panel discussed the diverse funding opportunities available to media art in North Rhine-Westphalia from the Land (federal state) and Kunststiftung NRW (Arts Foundation of North Rhine-Westphalia), comparing this situation with conditions in Berlin. The most important difference was deemed to be the integrative policy applying in Berlin, where projects involving media art receive consideration in all the various areas, whereas in NRW media art is considered to be a separate category.

Dr. Ingrid Wagner (Senate Chancellery Berlin - Culture) stressed that media art requires open and flexible subsidy programmes as opposed to rigid guidelines. In her view, direct individual funding of artists is the ideal route in combination with project assistance supplemented by festivals, exhibition possibilities and pooled technological resources. However, it clearly emerged that in Berlin the major supporters of media art are the Hauptstadt Kulturfonds (HKF; Capital Cultural Fund in Berlin) and Klassenlotterie (KL; Class Lottery) as opposed to the Berlin Senate.

Regina Wyrwoll (Secretary-General, Kunststiftung NRW) delivered a sharply contrasting plea in favour of retaining the NRW promotional structures, that is to say, the treatment of media art as a separate area of subsidy. Dr. Ingrid Stoppa-Sehlbach (Department of Cultural Affairs, State of North Rhine-Westphalia) asked whether artists had suggestions to make in regard to improving state funding structures. Opinions subsequently offered by members of the audience response were above all in favour of a sustainable funding policy, together with expressions of dismay about the closure of Tesla in Berlin. Artists, it was said, should also be paid fees for the production process, and it was pointed out that the creation of production facilities is an equally important requirement. Additional means might be raised by such means as a "tax on culture". The many references to the opening panel discussion made it clear that further clarification is necessary in regard to the question of a sustainable promotional model for media art, and that this question regards a dialogue between cultural policy-makers, art schools, and practising media artists. A dialogue of precisely this nature is among the themes addressed by medienwerk.nrw.

The necessity of continuing discussions between Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia was agreed upon, and particularly in regard to the question of the importance of funding opportunities and image factors in attracting artists to a particular location.

Information on arts and culture funds and grants in North Rhine-Westphalia available at:

www.kultur.nrw.de/de/foerderungen/index.html

Information on scholarships and cultural funding from the state of Berlin and Hauptstadt Kulturfonds available at: www.berlin.de/sen/kultur/programme/kunst/

Reception combined with screenings of current media art

The subsequent informal reception with presentations of current media art was hosted by Collegium Hungaricum. On display were six very different works chosen by the individual panelists as being especially illustrative of their own statements and demonstrating the bandwidth of the themes discussed. The appropriateness of the Hungarian venue was made evident by the documentation of a work by Attila Csörgö, this year's Nam June Paik prizewinner of the Kunststiftung NRW. An additional link between Hungary and North Rhine Westphalia is that Pecs in Hungary and the city of Essen (together with the Ruhr District) have both been designated European Cultural Capital 2010. Closer cooperation between media artists in either region is conceivable and desirable. Further information on Collegium Hungaricum Berlin (CHB) at: www.hungaricum.de

About medienwerk.nrw: The initiative was founded in 2001 as an open, intradisciplinary network for media-art institutions in North Rhine-Westphalia, primarily in the Ruhr District. With currently sixteen institutions and artists' initiatives as members, the goal of the network is to interconnect the participating practitioners' expertise in the genres of music, dance, visual art, research, teaching and sustainability in order to make media-art-related themes a more central object of cultural-political considerations. A further aim is to enhance the framework conditions pertaining to the presentation, production and distribution of media art. The network is striving to expand and integrate existing activities in order to emphasize the importance of media art within the structurally changing cultural landscape of North Rhine-Westphalia. medienwerk.nrw is hosting ISEA 2010. The network is supported by the Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia. Further information available at: www.medienwerk-nrw.de