



PETER SCHNEEMANN PROBLEMS OF COMPATIBILITY: ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NET-BASED ART AND MARKET IN A MEDIA HISTORY PERSPECTIVE

ART STUDIES AND INSTITUTIONS HAVE NOT YET LEARNED TO SUCCESSFULLY AND LASTINGLY CONVEY EPHEMERAL WORKS. THE CONCEPT OF WORK AND VALUE ORIENTED TO WHAT IS UNIQUE AND ARTISTICALLY DISTINCTIVE THUS MAKES NET ART APPEAR AS A SPECIAL AND HENCE ISOLATED AREA, THE DIFFERENCE OF WHICH APPARENTLY PREVENTS ITS ESTABLISHMENT IN THE MARKET. PETER SCHNEEMANN EXPLAINS THE PARAMETERS OF THE DISCUSSION AND OUTLINES POSSIBLE MODELS USING, AMONG OTHERS, THE HISTORICAL EXAMPLE OF VIDEO ART.

1. INTRODUCTION

The following reflections are intended to be a contribution to the discussion of the possible marketing of net-based art. The aim is not to provide a specific answer to the question of whether and how this genre can be established in the market; it is more a matter of opening up perspectives of the parameters of the discussion and the possible models. It must be noted, however, that there are radical differences in the various forms of art on the Internet in the dominance that the medium has for a specific work. Whereas for one work it may be more a matter of the distribution form, for another, the potential for interaction and processuality may be constituent.

A structural and historical perspective can first of all clarify which issues from the history of ideology apply to the art market, which are to be understood sociologically, and which take recourse to a media history discussion. The pragmatics of the project, the founding of a gallery for net-based art¹, already conjoin the mechanisms of an institution of the art market with the question of the specific features of a medium. Although this statement may seem trivial, it recalls reflexes that either presume a fundamental incompatibility in this reference or presuppose a transformation of one element (the institution) by another (the medium). In reference to new media, Rudolf Frieeling has spoken of fundamental «mediation paradoxes» to connote a contradiction that he says exists between new media and their distribution in conventional media.²

It is also evident that a categorical division, indeed even a conflict is principally constructed between «purely» artistic interests and economic, strategic considerations. This division is highly reactionary and does not in any way correspond with the state of reflection in research. The following remarks are based on the opposite assumption: Internet artists have a natural interest in anchoring their activity and production in the economy.³ Which historically evolved structures are to be considered here and could serve as a foundation for new strategies? Programmatically, this means looking for a new level of investigation, which integrates economic questions about the «product» in the analysis of a network of complex dependencies on the work concept and value concept.

2. WORK CONCEPTS

What is the ideological constant in the discussion of the relationship between net-based art and art trade based on? Every characterization of this art genre tends to state a radical difference from the conventional concept of art. The contrast used here is the positioning in the major reference system of art history, the categories of which can be quickly

¹ The founding of a commercially operating gallery for net-based art was the starting point for the research project *Owning Online Art*.

² Rudolf Frieeling, *40yearsvideoart.de*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2006, p. 7–14.

³ This applies not only to individual artists, but also to the community of artists operating on the Internet. An example of this is the close cooperation between the Ars Electronica and telecommunication and computer companies like Vodafone and Microsoft.

listed: **the artist** as author with an intention and production location, whose work can be contextualized in terms of history and subject matter; **the object** with a specific materiality, which can be identified, dated and exhibited as an original; **the location** (gallery, museum, art fair), which allows for a localization within the general rules of art; **the reception** as an action enabling an experience for the audience and thus generating an impact.

These categories serve as positioning aids for the recurrently erupting fundamental discussion of quality and its criteria. In addition, every single perspective can be revalued and absolutized as a normative instance. The classical art object, as it has been collected and inventoried for centuries, is located here unequivocally. The model of space and time that is applied is structured by the notion of a production process, which every reception process follows and is usually subordinated to. Up to the present, the aforementioned categories form a hierarchical structure for the inventory of every museum collection.⁴ These kinds of axioms are found even in current legislation, from copyright to the standard model of a gallery contract.⁵

The development of art in the 20th and 21st century led to greater and greater contradictions between new artistic practices and the institutional work concept. The strategies of Modernism were already no longer to be satisfied with a work concept focusing on the production of an aesthetic object with heroic individual authorship. The problems can be grasped at several levels, whereby it should be emphasized that the existence of a static work concept has frequently formed the rhetorical precondition for its negation.

Especially relevant, also for the so-called «new media», is the split between concept and realization that was already developed as a concept by the avant-garde movements of the 20th century: «On the one hand they took recourse to prefabricated industrial products and had the manufacture carried out by third parties, or on the other hand they sold to the collectors instructions for assembly and animated them to put the work together themselves.»⁶ These strategies may be conditioned by the necessity of accessing specialized skills, as well as in a conceptual deconstruction of authorship. Revisionist tendencies frequently complain here of the increasing importance of an intentional discourse that is understood as an abstract theoretical superstructure. It is thought that this no longer corresponds to an aesthetic «value», to sensual evidence.

Another very important level of the dissolution of the object concept applies to the classical demarcation of process, for instance the process of production and of action. All the qualities of the

⁴ Cf. Thomas Ketelsen, *Künstler-viten, Inventare, Kataloge: drei Studien zur Geschichte der kunsthistorischen Praxis*, Ammersbek bei Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek Peter Jensen, 1990; Hans-H. Clemens, *Inventur im Museum: Rekonstruktion und Modernisierung traditioneller Sammlungsverwaltung. Ein Praxisleitfaden*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2001; Tiffany Sutton, *The Classification of Visual Art: A Philosophical Myth and its History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁵ See also Christine Fuchs, *Avantgarde und Erweiterter Kunstbegriff. Eine Aktualisierung des Kunst- und Werkbegriffs im Verfassungs- und Urheberrecht* (Nomos Universitätsschriften Recht, Bd. 358), Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000; Maria Eichhorn, *The Artist's Contract. Interviews with Carl Andre, Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Paula Cooper, Hans Haacke, Jenny Holzer, Adrian Piper, Setz Siegelau, John Weber, Lawrence Weiner, Jackie Winsor*, Ed. Gerti Fietzek, Cologne: König, 2008.

⁶ Bernadette Walter, *Dunkle Pferde. Schweizer Künstlerkarrieren in der Nachkriegszeit*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 96.

transitory, the ephemeral and even of interaction are fundamentally opposed to the idea of an object collection, such as it is cultivated in museums, for instance, as a central institution of art history. In the case of performance art, the moment of lasting presentation can be transformed into a moment of unique or repeated performance. In this way, the performance presents itself as a possible form of realization that contains elements of interaction, frequently eluding control. The category of the conserved, datable work necessarily fails here. If one considers a museum like the MoMA, the consequences of this problematic issue are radical. This institution of the art of Modernism writes an object-based art history, which almost completely excludes performance art. Treatments of processuality, not only that of performance art, are of paradigmatic importance for an issue interested in the relationship between new media and the art market. For what can be historically traced here is how the strategy of the art market (see also its «proposed solutions») and the development of an artistic practice become mutually productive. A separate type of object thus arose from the genre of documentation, which is both traded and conserved in museums.⁷

It is possible to go through the reference system described above and find further «dissolutions». At the latest with Land Art and the subsequent various developments of action art in social space, a differentiation of the notion of the location of the art work is to be noted. Institutionalized space is only one location of the work, which refers to other locations of the same work.⁸

The art market, on the other hand, stands for a conservative concept of the work. Even though innovative economic concepts and forms of distribution, such as «service» or «on demand», were able to penetrate into the art system specifically through the conservative concept, there is little evidence of them to be found so far. The static concept of work follows a tradition of collecting, which links the preservation of an object over a longer period of time with the classical value canon. It should also not be overlooked that essential motivations for collecting art are still linked to forms of representation focusing on the object. Both object-relatedness and collection activity imply compensatory strategies, for instance in opposition to a «short-lived event culture»⁹, but possibly also in opposition to a concept of achievement oriented to increased flexibility and dynamics.

The question of the economic condition of art on the Internet is shifted almost simultaneously with the issue of conservation into the foreground of attention. This parallel clearly indicates that the work concept of net-based art certainly includes «being tied to» and «conditioned by» media. The temporal tie, as I explained it for the work concept, is now reflected in attention to hardware and

⁷ Cf. Miguel Angel Corzo, *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*, Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 1999; Beatrice von Bismarck, *Interarchive: archivarisches Praktiken und Handlungsräume im zeitgenössischen Kunstfeld*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2002.

⁸ Cf. Nina Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum: Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2002; Peter Schneemann, «Mapping the Site. Der Anspruch des Ortsspezifischen als Herausforderung für die kunsthistorische Dokumentation», in: *Kritische Berichte*, Vol. 33, No 3, 2005, p. 64 – 76.

⁹ See, for instance, also the argumentation of the Schaulager as a model for a new form of «preservation» at <http://www.schaulager.org> [03.2010].

its aesthetics, such as in the green monitor writing of older works.¹⁰ Computer art so often described as «immaterial» is tied again to a media carrier through the question of its capability of being archived.¹¹ There is more and more recognition of how the discourse of immateriality contradicts the strong dependency of net art on technical equipment and a sophisticated infrastructure. Net-based art urgently needs strategies for programmatically clarifying and demonstrating the work concept. The currently noticeable «retreat» to specialized niches is not a long-term perspective.

3. VALUE CONCEPTS

The category of art is a value category. All of its formulations are either reflected engagements with value concepts or they form a foil for these, regardless of an intentional separation or negation.¹² Art trade does not market objects, but rather value attributions relating to objects, but also to processes, intentions, materials, techniques, even artist subjects. In a sense, then, the value concept forms a horizon of meaning and reception for the changing formulations of art. This can lead to certain features of an artistic strategy being over-proportionally valued in this process of projection and gaining a purportedly constitutive character: the trace of the artist's hand, the rare material, uniqueness in comparison with the copy, innovativeness, provocative force, etc.

The interpretation process is closely related to societal agreement and undertakes a categorization of the singular work in a value discourse. New forms of the work concept were able to achieve a high status under ideal constructions of the avant-gardes. For net art, value attributions could be noted at a very early stage in conjunction with utopian proposals of communication, globalization and innovation. The protagonists themselves supported this ideal positioning.¹³ It seemed obvious to see the primary engagement with the social potentials and problems of a new information and communication technology in the use of the Internet.

«Today, Ars Electronica has become an international trademark, the trademark of a city **facing the future.**»¹⁴ As the title *Facing the Future* suggests, Ars Electronica sees itself as part of an avant-garde. It is not contemporaneity that characterizes the self-understanding of its scene, but rather orientation to the future/the innovation potential for science and society. In this way, a problematic reduction of the interpretation horizon takes place with art on the Internet through the

¹⁰ Christiane Paul, «The Myth of Immateriality – Presenting & Preserving New Media», in: Oliver Grau, *MediaArHistories*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007; cf. Also the proposal from Johannes Gfeller in the research project *AktiveArchive* at <http://www.aktivearchive.ch> [03.2010].

¹¹ On the concept of «immateriality» cf. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, New York, 1973, and also Tilman Baumgärtel, «Immaterialien – Aus der Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Netzkunst», at: <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/6/6151/1.html> [03.2010].

¹² Peter Schneemann, «Physis und Thesis. Die Frage nach dem Wert der Kunst in der Gegenwart», in: *Kodikas/Code, Ars Semiotica*, Vol. 25, No. 3 – 4, 2002, p. 275 – 290.

¹³ Cf. Stefan Münker and Alexander Roesler, *Poststrukturalismus*, Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2000.

¹⁴ *Facing the Future* is a review of two decades of the festival for computer art. Timothy Druckrey (Ed.), *Ars Electronica. Facing the Future*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999.

specific characteristics of the medium, which represses a differentiation into formal or aesthetic interests and conceptual reflections.

The resultant defining of net-based art almost exclusively through the technical medium has either a positive or even a subversive connotation; in both cases it is oriented to social relevance.

The first doctrine sees a completely new possibility for the relationship between artist and audience in the medium. The focus is targeted to the possibilities of distribution. Similarly to the introduction of print graphics in the 18th century of the discovery of the fax machine by artists like Nam June Paik or Joseph Beuys in the 1970s, a democratic potential is seen in the alternative to the status of the original: «By means of technical media, art is supposed to overcome the limitedness of the manually produced original, reach a new audience and mobilize society.»¹⁵ – «All users can operate interactively on an equal basis, everyone principally functions equally as sender and receiver. The Internet works in a way that is as decentral and self-organized as possible. The expansion is user-controlled. Central controlling bodies able to sustainably steer what happens on the Net are absent.»¹⁶

In 2000 Tilman Baumgärtel also propounded the thesis that the Internet allows a democratization of art, so that in principle everyone can become an artist: «Some of the most innovative and unusual net offers here come from 'living room senders' from all over the world. In this way, it seems that Brecht's famous demand that all media consumers should also become media producers has come a bit closer to being realized.»¹⁷

In this sense, net-based art is the first art direction that can theoretically be accessed worldwide and can generate simultaneity independent from space. It operates internationally and is received internationally. «Net art is everywhere and nowhere, so to speak – it takes place in a distributed computer network. The fundamental conditions of 'cyberspace [...] include dematerialization (the inhabitants and their living space are digital and thus, to a certain extent, bodiless) and space-time directness (the 'spaceless space' of the net world is largely independent from geographical distances).»¹⁸ However, we cannot speak of a completely international art scene. Rather, the electronic communication networks mirror the existing social-economic hierarchies and continue them.¹⁹

The second doctrine sees the Internet as already economically contaminated and seeks possibilities for a new appropriation in subversive strategies.²⁰ Net-based art today can no longer, in my opinion, define its ideal value solely through technological

¹⁵ Dieter Daniels, *Duchamp und die anderen: Der Modellfall einer künstlerischen Wirkungsgeschichte in der Moderne*, Cologne: DuMont, 1992, p. 18.

¹⁶ Sabine Helmers, Ute Hoffmann und Jeanette Hofmann, «Netzkultur und Netzwerkorganisation. Das Projekt 'Interaktionsraum Internet'». WZB Discussion Paper FS II 96 – 103, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 1996, p. 18.

¹⁷ Cf. Tilman Baumgärtel, «Zielgruppe: null Zuhörer. Konferenzbericht: 'net.congestion – Art, Music and Activism at the Dawn of the Fusion between the Internet and Broadcast Media', Amsterdam, 6 – 8 October 2000», in: *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 153, 2000, p. 468.

¹⁸ Tilman Baumgärtel, *[net.art] Materialien zur Netzkunst*, Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1999, p. 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰ «It will be a decisive programmatic point of the social ecology to guide these capitalist societies of the age of mass media into a post-mass medial age; I mean that the mass media have to be reappropriated by a multiplicity of subject-groups who are able to administer them on a path of singularisation.» Félix Guattari, *Die drei Ökologien*, ed. Peter Engelmann, Vienna: Passagen, 1994, p. 64.

innovation, but instead requires a critical positioning under art-specific aspects. The connotation of innovation is no longer sufficient, since it has penetrated so far into everyday life that a utopian potential is hardly directly recognized.²¹ The question of the economic possibilities of art on the Internet radically raises the question of whether it wants to operate with the status of art or move closer to completely different value systems, such as service or entertainment media.

Despite all the work on canceling out the boundary between art and life, the value of art is still defined specifically through this difference. The value of a work is conditioned by the categorical status of its purity and innocence, which separates it from the value system of consumer products. The «symbolic alchemy» of value enhancement functions according to this model from Bourdieu in isolating the world of art. Does art thus attain its value in the negation of an exchange value, as it assumes its function in society by rejecting any function?²² It must be added that for the self-understanding of most artistic disciplines, the Internet as a distribution medium has led to a crisis in the notion of «intellectual property». If the Net is understood as being «not a consumer medium, but a producer medium»²³, then the question of the economic survival of the artist remains. Which categories play a role in clarifying whether Internet art can tie into the traditional canon of art values again?

4. LOCATIONS AND ACTIONS

The more complex a work concept is and the faster notions of value are established, the more important the rules and standards of reception become. Locations and actions are key moments in the economic system of art. The location as reference is a real and lasting place. This criterion very precisely describes the function of a museum. The museum functions not only as an institution of preservation, but also as the place that records the history of the impact of a work. Even if net art is described as immaterial and as «contemporary», it is quite interesting to observe how the anecdotes and stories about older works of net art attract more attention than the work itself. History imbues a work with a cultural-historical value here in a thoroughly classical sense. One could go even further and stress that the museum as a compensatory instance ought to take on a new significance with respect to work concepts tending towards the ephemeral. Modernism declared the tradition of the apotheosis of the past, as it was still celebrated in the 19th century especially by the institutions of the art academy and the museum, as antagonistic to the truly creative forces of art. Art's memorial potential and stylistic recourse to binding historical positions merged into the image of an enemy. In the

²¹ The slogan of the online gallery artcart.de «be avantgarde buy net.art» thus had a strangely outmoded effect for a period following the avant-gardes.

²² Bernd Kleimann, *Wozu Kunst? die Frage nach ihrer Funktion*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001.

²³ Baumgärtel 2000 (op.cit.), p. 468.

avant-gardist emphasis on the contemporary, on the other hand, the arts should participate in the ideas of progress and cast off the ballast of memory.

Manifesto culture, as it can be grasped as the key moment of 1909 for the European avant-garde with the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni or Gino Severini, is based on a strict rhetorics of the negation of everything that refers to the past as tradition.²⁴ The appeal for liberation through destruction is thus logically aimed explicitly at the constructions of remembrance and rule mechanisms of museum and library. Skepticism towards the museum as an instance of history is still frequently cited, but a counter-movement can be recognized in an intensive engagement with the archive.²⁵ I am convinced that the incipient canon formation here is crucial for the interest of art collectors in this art form.

The category of location belongs to the status of the art work not only for the retrospective view, but also for its constitution in a social act. A work without a community that can consider it in a social interaction can hardly function as an object of desire. The recipient of art enters into a close connection to the situation of display. Like the work itself, the recipient is part of a display. Here one might recall the revaluation of the recipient in the early history of the «salon». The reception of art is a societal process, the rituals of which for Modernism have been developing since the 18th century.²⁶ Art and the shared agreement about its value form a platform for the protagonists to position and distinguish themselves. It is to be noted that only those «locations of art» have gained special attractiveness in recent years, which offer recipients possibilities to appear as «actors». Whereas museums register less and less audience for their permanent collections, art fairs, «art occasions», collectors meetings and other «events» are continually breaking records in audience numbers.

5. MODEL FOR COMPARISON

A prognosis for the future development of the art market and its relationship to net-based art cannot be provided here. However, video art can serve in this case as a model for comparison, which was celebrated as a new medium in the 1970s and elicited very similar discourses on its potential and media-specific identity. In terms of their structure, the axioms are surprisingly similar: the art video was initially not capable of competing in the exhibition context. Presentations usually took place in a darkened special room. A hybrid in between exhibit, television and cinema, video art was a counter-proposal to the classical, iconic image media.²⁷ Its authors claimed a socially relevant, even political role for themselves; the medium,

²⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Malsch, *Künstlermanifeste: Studien zu einem Aspekt moderner Kunst am Beispiel des italienischen Futurismus*, Weimar: VDG, 1997.

²⁵ Bismarck 2002 (op.cit., Note 7); Ingrid Schaffner, *Deep Storage: Arsenale der Erinnerung: Sammeln, Speichern, Archivieren in der Kunst*, Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1997.

²⁶ Oskar Bätschmann, *Ausstellungskünstler. Kult und Karriere im modernen Kunstsystem*, Cologne: Du Mont 1997.

²⁷ Cf. Dieter Daniels, «Video/Kunst/Markt», in: Wulf Herzogenrath und Rudolf Frieeling (Ed.), *40jahrevideokunst.de. Digitales Erbe: Videokunst in Deutschland von 1963 bis heute*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006, p. 42.

which ran counter to the jaded consumption of mass media and the bourgeois concept of the original, was to develop its emancipatory and democratic effect beyond the context of art as well.²⁸ And finally, the sale of unlimited video tapes was established at an early stage.

The development of video art demonstrates very clearly, I think, how a new medium that found a broad social use within the framework of the entertainment industry developed strategies to establish itself in the classical art context. Although it might be a reduction, the thesis could be proposed that within these strategies ideological questions of a new «democratic» art were abandoned in favor of the old model of the certified individual work. The questions of an alternative target group and new forms of reception were not able to prevail in their radicalness either. Since the mid-1990s (Daniels takes the *documenta X* in 1997 as the key date) video art has undergone a qualitative leap in terms of recognition in the exhibition context and in the art market. As the reason for this, Daniels cites the changed work concept and the transfer from video tape to projected art video for spatially encompassing presentation.²⁹ Technical progress in image projection (illumination and image size) played an essential role in this. Consequently, physical sensory experience in the reception plays a central role for commercial success.³⁰

The art video substantially expanded its development as a hybrid from the classical image genres of painting and photography and the new, digital image worlds³¹ by being anchored in the installation. «This accommodates the type of the marketable art work to the extent that it still has an object character, even if it is an ambiguous one. The object (video tape, DVD) is not itself pictorial, but it forms an entity that can still be separated from its playing device. The significance of this is less technical than market-psychological: one does not buy a digital conglomerate of hardware and software, as in the case of an interactive art work, for instance, but instead «only» the pictorial «work» without display technology.»³²

For the potential development of net-based art on the market, following the analysis of work concept and value concept and a look at the example of the boom of the art video, this poses a seemingly very simple question. In order to facilitate a marketing of net-based art as a genre, is it necessary for this genre to simulate criteria of the classical art object, or can the art circulate in and through the Internet as an art good in distribution channels that originate outside the art business?

Translated from the German by Aileen Derieg

²⁸ Gerry Schum's project of a television gallery in 1970 and the attempt to make limited art videos marketable with his video gallery can be seen as a turning point from the utopian attitude of the 1960s to an art-immanent concept of video art in Germany. Cf. Daniels 2006 (op.cit.), p. 45.

²⁹ «The leap in market value stands instead for a completely changed work concept of video art, which was prepared in the course of the 1980s through, among others, video installation and video sculpture, which was quickly forgotten again, but it has only had a broad impact since about ten years. In fact, many already established video artists already stopped producing video tapes at the end of the 1980s, only making space-related work then instead, [...]» Cf. Daniels 2006 (op.cit.), p. 43.

³⁰ Cf. Karlheinz Lüdeking, «Jenseits des weißen Würfels. Wie die Kunst dem Betrachter ausserhalb der Galerie begegnet», in: Wolfgang Kemp (Ed.), *Zeitgenössische Kunst und ihre Betrachter*, Jahresring 43, Cologne: Oktagon 1996.

³¹ Daniels 2006 (op.cit.), p. 40.

³² Daniels 2006 (op.cit.), p. 40.

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