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Whatever Happened to Media Art?

A Summary and Outlook

These days there is much talk about a crisis of media art. Take, for example, Stefan Heidenreich's 2008 review of the Berlin transmediale: "Media art was an episode. But since the institutions that support it are still extant, it survives as a dinosaur from the 1980s and '90s. [...] Artists work with any media they choose, from drawing to the Internet. [...] There is a wealth of good art that naturally works with media. But there is no media art."[1] This text has provoked considerable debate, which can be retrieved from the archives of the German *rohrpost* electronic mailing list. Internationally, similar discussion followed an announcement from Ekow Eshun, director of the London ICA, that he would close the Live & Media Arts department. His justification read: "It's my consideration that, in the main, the art form lacks depth and cultural urgency."[2] German media theorist Florian Rötzer, in his introduction to a 2010 symposium called "New Media in the Arts: History – Theory – Aesthetics", characterized media art as a "creature artificially kept alive, lagging far behind expectations."[3] Even earlier, some insiders of the media art scene had struck an ironic distance, as witnessed by an exhibition title like *The Art Formerly Known as New Media* from

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[1] Stefan Heidenreich, "Es gibt gar keine Medienkunst!", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 27 January 2008.

[2] See http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/oct/23/ica-live-arts-closure or http://imomus.livejournal.com/409301.html. All links accessed 1 November 2011.

[3] *Neue Medien in der Kunst. Geschichte – Theorie – Ästhetik*, symposium at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Munich, 21–22 January 2010.

2005 (a paraphrase on The Artist Formerly Known as Prince).[4] Five years later, Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham would attempt to legitimize a specification of media art in their book *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, under chapter headings that read "How New Media Art Is Different" or "Why Would a New Media Artist Want to Exhibit in an Art Museum?".[5]

The theory of media faces a similar dilemma: how can its definition as a separate field be legitimate if media technology has become part and parcel of our everyday life. Put the other way around: can a genre of art or theory exist as an entity outside media technology and its cultural significance, without either explicit reference or implicit dissociation? Isn't every form of theory necessarily media theory today, and doesn't every artwork to a certain extent belong in the field of media art?

Most recent critique of media art and theory thrives on the fact that the genre used to be part of the euphoria around new media and the bright future the digital technology seemed to promise during the 1980s and '90s. These were symptoms of a boundless desire for modernism blazing up for maybe the last time, bracing itself against looming postmodern tendencies.

Already since the 19th century, (media) art had been on the defence against the more radical progress that science and technology had to offer, and against their positivist postulations of final truths. This is why Baudelaire, who stands at the beginning of modern art theory, championed an artistic "order of the imagination", where there was no causally established, progressive link from Signorelli to Michelangelo or from

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[4] Curated by Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, 18 September – 23 October 2005.

[5] Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2010.

Perugino to Raphael. Instead Baudelaire suspected that "unending progress would be humanity's most ingenious and cruel form of torture."[6] Whereas the Futurist founding manifesto in 1909 still called for the arts to "sing" technological progress, following manifestos demanded that the new technologies be used as aesthetic instruments. And from the 1920s, artists from the scenes around the Bauhaus, absolute film or dadaism no longer were satisfied to use technologies that already existed, and instead of merely recycling inventions made for other purposes they developed new methods and effects often with the help of engineers.[7]

Falsified theories in the natural sciences end up among the paradigms that have "died out" (Thomas Kuhn), while obsolete media technologies end up on the graveyard of "dead media" (Bruce Sterling). Art, on the other hand, even if it uses technical media that quickly become obsolete, always has an eye towards the eternal. On this point we also can refer back to Baudelaire, who saw it as the supreme challenge for modern art "to distil the eternal from the transitory."[8]

Today, historians and theorists of science have increasingly come to criticize the separated notions of progress that underlie the arts and sciences, with roots still firmly stuck in positivist self-conceptions. In *Science as Art* (1984), Paul Feyerabend reached back to traditional art-historical methodology and used it to define a new history model for the sciences. According to

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[6] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, vol. II, p. 581.

[7] See Dieter Daniels, Barbara U. Schmidt (eds.): *Artists as Inventors – Inventors as Artists*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008.

[8] See Walter Benjamin's analysis of Charles Baudelaire's *À une passante* from *Les Fleurs du mal* (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, vol. I/2, pp. 547f.).

him, in the natural sciences a belief in absolute progress is the self-deceit of "totalitarian thought". Instead the art-historical model, which allows for simultaneous alternate developments, would describe the real situation of the sciences more adequately. Bruno Latour's proposition that "we have never been modern" continued and expanded on these thoughts. His eponymous book is first and foremost a critique of the strict separation between nature and society in the modern natural sciences, at the same time censuring postmodernism as "a symptom, not a fresh solution."[9] Latour sees an alternative in understanding modernity not as a radical break with the past, a single revolution, but rather as a processual, iterative model where hybrid conditions are continually translated and interconnected. It remains an unrealizable goal to ever arrive at an absolutely modern age that can never be overtaken by the past again. This thought figure from Latour's science theory can be similarly useful in a discussion of the arts. We're in the midst of a complex interplay between methods and subject areas: Feyerabend imports art-historical methods to remodel science theory, while Latour's science theory becomes adopted and developed by art theorists.

This leads us back to our original question for a definition of media art, as such interplay between art history and science theory has been stimulating artistic practice since the 1960s. "Art, science and technology" used to be a heading for diverse international activities that could not be subsumed under the name of a movement or a manifesto, that offered a critique of technological consequences while still following a fascination with the possibilities of the new technology.

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[9] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 46.

The "heroic" founding time of what has come to be labelled media art began around 1960, while the term itself was used much later, roughly from the 1990s. Initially there was a convergence of multiple factors that developed, partly in independence, from the 1950s through the 1970s, which could increasingly be described as a coherent area. Electronic music of the 1950s belongs to those (from Karlheinz Stockhausen to Pierre Boulez and John Cage, the electronic studio of the WDR radio station in Cologne, the music journal *Die Reihe* etc.), the open work of art (John Cage and Umberto Eco), cybernetics (in theory as well as experimental practice), reflection on mass media (in literature, art and music, from Burroughs to Warhol and Cage), computer graphics, the Experiments in Art and Technology group (E.A.T.), the expanded cinema movement, intermedia art (fluxus, happenings, the Gutai group etc.), the New Dance (Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown etc.), conceptual art and site specific art (including its manifestations on film and photographs, right up to the *Land Art* piece for Gerry Schum's TV Gallery), body art and experimental theatre (from Samuel Beckett to Bruce Nauman) and also institutional critique and political activism (from Hans Haacke to Dan Graham).

What today trades under the name of media art used to be a hybrid area where multiple interdisciplinary cross connections and collaborations had become possible without forming a common conceptual or strategic identity. Important stimuli for both technological practice and artistic theory originated from the simultaneous developments in cybernetics during the 1960s, a transdisciplinary bridging of the gap between the "two cultures" of natural sciences and the humanities. In the 1960s, these contexts were not limited to the fine arts – in the way that media art is categorized today – but as a matter of course would include literature, music as well as the performing arts.

This let the genre survive the crumbling contexts of intermedia art, cybernetics and the Art, Science and Technology movement, though it increasingly came under pressure to define its special characteristics and to distance itself against the more "classical" arts.[10]

The work of Nam June Paik is exemplary for this situation: in his famous *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* from 1963, he combined the elements of New Music, randomness, the open work of art, mass media and intermedia to arrive at a participatory total work of art "for all senses".[11] Paik used and modified pianos, tape recorders, record players and TV sets for a kind of DIY bricolage that anticipated the future potential of distribution media turned production media and the new interactive uses for them. Paik's complete ensemble – most of which does not survive and has only been documented in black-and-white photographs – can be seen as a precursor of video art, sound art, installation art and interactive art in equal measure.

This kind of intermediality defined the "heroic" phase of media art, but by the beginning of the 1970s distinct disciplines began to establish themselves more strongly: the craze of mixing media gave way to a quest for media-specific artworks. The reasoning behind this development today seems like a crude mixture of two irreconcilable theories: on the one hand Clement Greenberg's modernism, driven by the paradigm of a self-referentiality immanent to the artistic medium, as well as

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[10] Douglas Davis paints a last panorama of these developments in *Art and the Future: A History-Prophecy of the Collaboration between Science, Technology and Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1972.

[11] See *Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music. Electronic Television. Revisited*, edited by Susanne Neuburger, exhibition catalogue Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Cologne: Walther König, 2009.

his judgment against intermedial tendencies; on the other Marshall McLuhan's maxim that the medium itself – or the choice of a medium – carries one, if not *the* central message. During the course of the 1970s, the field of media arts diversified, highly specialized scenes and contexts replaced the intermedial blend of the 1960s. Among the major categories were: computer graphics, video art, experimental cinema and performance art. Each of these art forms started developing a specific identity that would rely on its medial difference from related forms – the aim was to define an autonomous genre by virtue of its technical medium. In video art competitions of the 1980s, juries would still consider experimental film transferred to video as attempted fraud and in computer art manually complemented computer graphics were seen as gaffes at best.

Increasingly, these genres have been collected under the fine arts umbrella. This may partly be due to pragmatic motifs, since discourses and institutions within the fine arts are more open for experiments then those of music, literature, film or theatre who are often stuck in a conflict between avant-garde and mainstream.

Also, each of these genres developed subdivisions between the diverse artistic approaches – for example in video art or in experimental film between a more structural/formal, conceptual, narrative or sociopolitical practice. This is comparable to the rivalry between the different, partly national "schools" of electronic music in the 1950s: French *musique concrète* and composition based on found sound, "serial music", which had been mostly developed in Germany, based on rigid mathematic concepts (see the above-mentioned journal *Die Reihe*), and American indeterminacy after John Cage, who criticized conventional concepts of authorship.

Within these diverse artistic practices there already lay the problematic behind defining genres through their use of media technology. Completely heterogeneous approaches stood in apparently close relation, but this just overemphasized the shared technological format and suppressed the differences in use and artistic intention. To name a couple of examples: Bruce Nauman's early video pieces were based on performances in front of a camera, intended to be shown in a gallery context. Their low-tech aesthetics and long real-time durations made them unfit for TV broadcast. On the other hand, almost the complete videos that Nam June Paik produced since 1969 have been explicitly made for TV shows, and the use of experimental high-end studio technology – partly developed by Paik himself – was made possible by the financial support of TV channels. Today these tapes are wrongly viewed by art historians only within an art context, while really they are media theory in practice.[12] Accordingly, Paik started his *Gobal Groove* from 1973 with the motto: "This is a glimpse of a video landscape of tomorrow when you will be able to switch on any TV station on the earth and TV guides will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book." To understand the "global channel zapping" simulated in this video, it becomes necessary to realize that in the 1970s television, long before satellite broadcasts, was still a national, or, especially in the US, even regional affair. The theoretical groundwork to the video piece had been developed by Paik three years earlier: "If we could compile a weekly TV festival made up of music and dance from every country, and

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[12] Cf. Claus Pias' attempt to find implicit media theories within the practice of developers of 1960s media technology – theories that proved so operational that they became the foundation of today's media reality, but are no longer familiar or even available as theory (see for example "Asynchron – Einige historische Begegnungen zwischen Informatik und Medienwissenschaft", *Informatik-Spektrum* 31/1 (2008), pp. 5–8).

distributed it free-of-charge round the world via the proposed common video market, it would have a phenomenal effect on education and entertainment."[13] (Media) art would no longer compete for the latest advances in art, but on the contrary *anticipate the future of media technology and its repercussions in society* – in Paik's work through an affirmatively utopian scenario (and elsewhere through media critique).

Paik included implicit media theory in his art as early as 1963 with *Participation TV*. Way back when Germany had a single television channel, Paik was a precursor of interactive mass media developments. [14] These were the days when Marshall McLuhan postulated that media theory should not just analyze the status quo, but instead, if it wanted to be taken seriously, must influence the area under investigation: "Control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it. Anticipation gives the power to deflect and control force."[15]

Despite the fact that in the 1970s electronic art was supported by TV channels and the computer industry, both of whom supplied grants and means of production, the long-term economic base and also the cultural discourse were still with the fine arts and their network of galleries, collectors and museums. Far into the 1980s, it remained impossible to even cover the expenses for production and hardware through the art

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[13] Nam June Paik, "Global Groove and Video Common Market" (1970), in Judson Rosebush, ed., *Videa 'n' Videology 1959–1973*, Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1974, unpag. Online: http://www.mediaartnet.org/source-text/88/.

[14] See Dieter Daniels, "Touching Television: Participation Media with Marshall McLuhan, John Cage and Nam June Paik" in the upcoming publication accompanying the *Television, de-, inter-, trans-* seminar, Nam June Paik Art Center, Seoul, 7/8 October 2011.

[15] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1964, p. 199.

market. Most media artists would thus live within a dual economy and combine grants and other art world resources with industry commissions or TV broadcast sales. Only few artists could successfully transfer their work for the television mass medium back into an art context – like Paik with *TV-Garden* from 1977, a room-filling installation based on the *Global Groove* video, which he presented at *documenta 6* in Kassel and later sold to the Guggenheim Museum. By contrast, many quite successful media artists vanished from the art scene because their creativity could be used more profitably in the media industry – John Whitney and John Sanborn come to mind here.

The beginning of the institutionalization of media art at the end of the 1960s is an outcome of this situation even if the term itself still wasn't used. A selection of initiatives would include:

- E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), ca. 1967– 1970

- Leonardo Magazine, 1968–today

- Computer Arts Society (CAS), 1968–1980s

- Television Gallery Gerry Schum, 1969–1973

- Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), 1971–today

- Experimental TV Center, 1971–today

- Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS/MIT), 1968– today

These initiatives depended on diverse organizational models and followed different aims. They had in common that they were initiated by individuals fighting for the cause – not by public institutions in top-down decisions. They were based on what we today call public-private partnership, a combination of public funds and private sponsors that was uncommon then (at

least in Europe). The Center for Advanced Visual Studies was a special case, since the MIT functioned as its potent parent organization – and later became the standard model for new-founded institutions throughout the 1980s.

All these initiatives developed platforms for the production and distribution of electronic art outside of the established art institutions. At the same time, they explicitly positioned themselves between the cracks of classic artistic genres and of the diverse models of artistic or economic success within the dual economy described above. In the course of their development they met with similar problems: could the electronic arts defend and extend their cultural-industrial and artistic-technological in-between position, or would they time and again founder at the incompatibility of economic and aesthetic criteria?

That this question would remain relevant for the 1980s became obvious during the second phase of institutionalization, which was no longer restricted to individual initiatives but took on larger dimensions and more public cultural significance. Only now the term media art came into use. Unfortunately, a history of media art institutions is missing to this day, which also makes it difficult to write a history of the term.

Here are some major initiatives from the institutionalization of media art in the 1980s, sorted after founding date (without claim to completeness; some are no longer active):

- 1978 Montevideo Amsterdam

- 1979 Ars Electronica Linz

- 1980 Video Art Festival Locarno

- 1981 Experimental Film Workshop Osnabrück (after 1988 European Media Art Festival)

– 1982 World Wide Video Festival The Hague

– 1982 Infermental video magazine

– 1983 Time Based Arts Amsterdam (1993 fused with Montevideo to form Netherlands Media Art Institute)

– 1983 Manifestation Internationale de Video Montbeliard

– 1984 Videonale Bonn

– 1984 Marler Video-Kunst-Preis

– 1984 Hull Time Based Arts (HTBA)

– 1986/1987 V_2 Rotterdam, Manifestatie voor de Instabiel Media

– 1988 Videofest Berlin (after 1997 transmediale)

– 1989 Artec Biennale, Nagoya

– 1989 Multimediale, ZKM Karlsruhe

In the context of these festivals and institutions, finally media art was taking shape as a specialized discipline defined by the social network of an international community, that each in their own location had to win a similar fight against the marginalization of an art between the cracks. In a sense, since the 1980s media art has really taken place in a "global village", spread over the globe but still familial in size. The institutional standing of these initiatives varied widely: Ars Electronica, for example, received support from the city of Linz and national broadcaster ORF early on and became an official cultural attraction for the area, whereas the Videonale Bonn, initiated by a group of students in a small project room, only very slowly worked itself into stable funding and an institutional haven in the municipal art museum. Often these activities started as one-offs which met with such success, or were so persistently pushed by the initiators, that they became recurring events.

Some of those developed from the festival stage into more durable institutional forms – again the Ars Electronica Center is a good example here.

The significance this second phase of institutionalization had for the implementation of the term media art becomes clear in the renaming of the Osnabrück, Amsterdam and Berlin initiatives during the 1990s. The term now came to stand for a reintegration of the different genres like video art, sound art and interactive art. In return, the "global village" increasingly distanced itself from the field of "contemporary art", and media art was more rarely seen in biennials and documentas, the art market and museum collections of the 1980s than it had been a decade earlier. A central cause for the marginalization of media art within the fine arts context was that the latter became museum-friendly again, with newly opened postmodern museum buildings and the rising importance of the private collections for public opinion.

From the end of the 1980s a stronger interest in connecting media art and media theory became obvious. The reasons for that, besides the fact that media art was disconnected from the fine arts discourse, lay in the growing establishment of media studies as an academic discipline in its own right. The broader public's growing interest in digital innovations was also important for artistic interventions in the field. Three initiatives were typical for these developments:

- ISEA Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts, since 1988

- Interface Conference Hamburg, from 1990 until 2000

- HyperKult – Computer als Medium, since 1990

Then, during the 1990s, large public institutions explicitly founded for media art, finally established themselves. Major institutions of this third phase were:

- Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe (ZKM), institutes and foundation since 1989, opening of the centre 1997

- Institut für Neue Medien (INM) at the Städelschule Frankfurt am Main, since 1989

- Academy of Media Arts Cologne (KHM), since 1990[16]

- Ars Electronica Center Linz (AEC), since 1993

- Intercommunication Center Tokyo (ICC), since 1997

A reference model for these institutions was the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the MIT Cambridge, since it was connected to a large university and research institute. The economic power of the MIT was a political factor, while the mission of the institutions was clearly defined as cultural. This can be shown in two longer excerpts from the concept papers of the two German institutions, which deserve a closer look.

From Concept '88, the founding document of the ZKM Karlsruhe:

"Because of the distribution and almost limitless availability of new media like e.g. television, radio, video, computer graphics, holography, cassette recorders, personal stereos, CDs etc. people relate to art and also to technology in a different manner today. Art like technology now plays an integral and decisive role in all matters of everyday life and culture. [...] The Centre for Art and Media Technology therefore will be a centre for a human technology. It will develop one of the most immediate manifestations of life in

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[16] Many other new study courses for media art, media design, interface culture etc. could be named here, but this would require its own essay.

the human spirit – the desire for aesthetic expression – and reconcile it with technology."[17]

From the founding concept of the KHM Cologne, ca. 1989/90:

"The academy is devoted to modern methods and technologies of image production and transmission, which increasingly become part of current design and art practice. This especially includes a critical analysis of media culture and a responsible and moral use of mass media.

Objectives:

1. An influence on media developments (through arts, design and sciences). The aim is cultural integration to prevent an expansion that is purely technologically oriented.

2. Promotion of a close cooperation between artists, designers, authors and directors working for movies and TV, scientists and engineers."[18]

These concepts contain some of the arguments we have already encountered during the above quick sketch of media art history: themes from the 1960s, like intermedia and the dialogue between two cultures, were now applied to the relation between art and technology in the digital realm. The remains of a futurist desire for an artistic design of things to come, and a mission to improve the world, were now embedded in a sociocultural context.

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[17] Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, *Konzept '88*, ed. by Stadt Karlsruhe, p. 5, 8.

[18] "Grundkonzept der Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln", in *Studiengang Audiovisuelle Medien, Studieninformation Wintersemester 1990/91*, Cologne, October 1990.

Standard elements of media theory and the philosophy of technology also came into play. The technological optimism of McLuhan, who believed that it was possible to control and change the media through anticipation, went together with a characteristically German technology scepticism that harks back to Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry and Martin Heidegger's warning that technology would make us fall into self-estrangement.

These concepts were no longer artist manifestos or individual initiatives drawn up by ideological motivation, these were texts immediately connected to political decision-making and lead toward budgets, appointment schemes, equipment depots and huge buildings! In fact the programmes and projects of the "heroic age" before media art have now, after 30 years, reached the stage of practical politics. This is not due to the persistence of the artists involved. Instead the changes in the medial environment have now become so obvious that the necessary reaction from culture and education planners seems almost belated.

An artistic and theoretical reflection of the changes that the (at that time) "new media" brought to the living environment was a central motive of these founding concepts. Still it didn't become clear how the cultural mission of these institutions would be positioned in face of the growing self-evidence of digital media. Simultaneously to the founding of these specialized institutions, digital technologies radically de-specified. They have become everyday tools, implemented in all reaches of social experience, which makes the status of a special institution, designed to develop them artistically, so much harder to justify. It doesn't help that the research mandate stressed in the founding concepts of the ZKM and the

AEC since then has gradually been sacrificed for the more effective publicity of event organization.

Another central factor contributing to the current legitimation crisis of institutions founded during this third phase in the 1990s, is that by now the electronic image is by and large integrated into contemporary art. Especially video art pieces are presented on all major survey exhibitions – and they are no longer labelled video art, since the medium has been taking its equal place beside photography and painting. While during the 1980s, video tapes still sold for low standard prices even if the artist was quite prominent, today there is a fully developed price structure on the art market, and limited edition copies can demand six-figure prices.[19] These market mechanisms repeat the way photography was absorbed into the art market in the 1970s. On the other hand, unlike video, digital media art (interactive art, net art, software art etc.) is still a tough sell, often donated by the artist for free if an institution agrees to preserve and review it. This has nothing to do with artistic significance of the work, it speaks of a basically conservative art market that has become the ruling force for museums and private collections.

Even the titles of pertinent book publications suggested a growing separation between video and media art.[20] While the "iconic" video medium changed over into an art context, processual, experimental, participative media art more than

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[19] See Dieter Daniels, "Video / Art / Market", in Rudolf Frieling, Wulf Herzogenrath (eds.): *40yearsvideoart.de – Digital Heritage: Video Art in Germany from 1963 to Today*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006, pp. 40–49.

[20] The Basic Art series of the publisher Taschen offers separate volumes: Sylvia Martin, *Video Art* and Reena Jana and Mark Tribe, *New Media Art*. The World of Art series from Thames & Hudson has four volumes: Michael Rush, *Video Art*; Michael Rush, *New Media in Art*; Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*; Rachel Greene, *Internet Art*.

ever remained a specialized artistic discipline. The model of a re-integration of media art genres (video art, computer art, sound art, interactive art etc.) under a common media art umbrella, which had come up during the second phase of institutionalization in the 1980s, seems to be no longer viable. Today "being digital" is no longer a criterion for artistic or even cultural innovation. In the wake of techno music, the term post-digital has found currency (introduced in 2000 by Kim Cascone to describe so-called glitch music, where failures in the digital media are exploited creatively), while in the visual media arts there is a trend towards the "neo-analogue", a return to simple DIY techniques.

This is why the initial motives of a cultural separation between "high art" and media innovation, which led to the founding of institutions during the third phase, are not outdated – but they should be integrated in an overarching cultural research concept, where art history (for the fine arts, music, film and theatre alike), media theory, scientific theory and the cultural sciences study the role of the digital media from a multitude of perspectives. But the necessities that lead institutions like ZKM and AEC to organize popular blockbuster exhibitions work against this aim. The show *YOU_ser 2.0: Celebration of the Consumer* at ZKM in 2009 above all proved that the exhibition format cannot compete with the possibilities of the Web 2.0. The exhibiton could not match the goal defined in its programme: "YOU are the content of the exhibition! [...] Through their participation, the YOU, the user, has the chance to change the world."[21] The same year 2009 saw the reopening of the Ars Electronica Center in Linz, whose exhibit *New Views of Humankind* hardly featured any art or electronic media, but

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[21] See the complete programme note at
http://www02.zkm.de/you/index.php?lang=en

rather popular scientific presentations of biotechnology and robotics.

The most urgent questions can today no longer be dealt with in exhibitions, symposia and catalogue publications alone, instead they require new formats that use the digital media to reach their audience, like the scientific online platforms common in the natural sciences. Since 2000 there have been some exemplary ventures, amongst others the platform netzspannung.org at the Fraunhofer Institute for Intelligent Analysis and Information Systems IAIS, which concentrates on online teaching and networking, and the platform mediartnet.org at ZKM Karlsruhe, where content is organized featuring thematic complexes, cultural contexts and work analyses. While these platforms are accepted tools for the distribution of knowledge, their contribution to the theoretical field has hardly been recognized, since art history, media theory and cultural studies are still focused on the book format.[22] Both online projects were financed through external funds and unfortunately, after support expired, have not been continued or even updated any further by the respective institutions.

There are few examples for a fourth phase of institutionalization, where media art is historically defined within the hybrid contexts of culture, technology, society and science. Institutes like the Daniel Langlois Foundation in Montreal and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research. in Linz tried to fulfil the task of making media art accessible in all its complexity, of documenting it and preserving important works,

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[22] See Dieter Daniels, "Das Vermittlungsparadox der Medienkunst: Thesen und Modelle zur multimedialen Vermittlung", in Gerhard Johann Lischka, Peter Weibel (eds.): *Die Medien der Kunst – die Kunst der Medien*, Wabern bei Bern: Benteli, 2004, pp. 90–104.

explicitly integrating the new distribution channels of the internet into their approach and creating extensive online content.[23] Both initiatives, however, have been discontinued or cut down respectively, for quite different reasons, before they could make a widespread impact.[24] The "dinosaurs from the 1980s and '90s", to recall a phrase quoted at the beginning of this essay, institutions of the third phase like ZKM or AEC remain established in cultural politics, but they are no longer legitimized through the belief in progress that defined the former "new media". Names chosen in the 1990s for the departments of the AEC in Linz, like Museum of the Future, Futurelab etc., sound old-fashioned already. The other side of this fixation with the future is uncritical self-historization of the institutions (cf. the self-display on occasion of the ZKM's 10 year anniversary in 2007 and only three years later, their 20 years anniversary, this time of the ZKM foundation; also cf. the coffee-table book *Ars Electronica 1979–2009: The First 30 Years*.)

One decisive problem for the future of media art is the preservation and documentation of its fragile electronic past. Both analogue and digital information suffer from decay and the most newish hardware or software technology ages the

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[23] See Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, http://www.fondation-langlois.org/, and Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research., http://media.lbg.ac.at/, the final report http://media.lbg.ac.at/media/pdf/final_report_lbi_mkf.pdf as well as the subsequent project websites "See This Sound", web archive, http://www. see-this-sound.at, and "Netpioneers", http://www.netpioneers.info/.

[24] The activities of the Daniel Langlois Foundation, privately founded in 1997, have been heavily curtailed in 2008, and their collection of original documents on the history of media art is to be transferred to a public institution. The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, directed by the author from 2005 to 2009, has been closed by the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft after only four years.

quickest because of the permanent necessary upgrades. The preservation of our digital cultural heritage is a topic that bears on all reaches of cultural production, but media art is maybe the most obvious problem area. Many media artworks depend on individual technical solutions and cannot be standardized to save the data and functionality. It is not the acquisition budget that really counts for a collection of media art (often artists will feel it in their best interest to donate works to institutions), but permanent funds to preserve the works over time (as migration or emulation, depending on the medium), which is not yet a fact that has registered on the agenda of cultural politics.

Arguments for the significance of such preservation reach far beyond the central context of media art. Selected examples of media art can be seen as cornerstones in developing a historic consciousness of the relation between media culture and media technology. On the other hand, individual approaches by media artists that prove innovative in their time can become useful for developing models for the digital heritage beyond the standards of video and audio media. Besides the mere preservation of works, media art can also prove the importance of a thorough documentation of artistic intentions, concepts and contexts and their embeddedness in contemporary history.[25] The institutions of the third phase so far can achieve this only marginally or not at all. The most immediate problem today is that both – the preservation of the digital heritage and the production or event display of new media art – have to be paid from the same budget. So that taken seriously the preservation of a past growing ever richer

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[25] Cf. a workshop at Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research. 2006: Survival and Maintenance of Media Based Art, An Overview of Existing and Developing Strategies of Documentation / Archiving / Conservation, http://www.media.lbg.ac.at/en/veranstaltungen.php?iMenuID=3&iEventID=7

will eat up investments in the future of media art.[26] The material preservation of media art and the surrounding cultural technological context as a historical phenomenon will therefore require a radical reorientation necessary both for an understanding of media art and its legitimization as a specific discipline in the future.

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Translated from the German by Lutz Eitel

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[26] In most cases media art institutions will not even sufficiently document their own activities.