

Amnesia International – early computer art and the Tendencies movement

Darko Fritz
<http://www.mi2.hr/alive/>

... Technology progresses. Art changes. It never progresses. ...

Statement of the collective Anonima in May 1968,
catalogue 'Tendencies 4' (1968 - 69), Zagreb, 1970.

Media archaeology research on early computer art can help us to reflect upon the roots of networked (collective) produced art, art networks itself, interactive art, technology and communication mediated art and socially active role of the art in information society. Those subjects remind us of keywords in recent media art production and media culture and were both discussed in depth and made in art practice in particular (last?) avantgarde art movements in the 1960's. Its turbulent history in the 1960's reminds us of the history of net.art and its filtraton and recent position in mainstream art system. Does history repeat?

In the 1961-1973 period, the then Contemporary Art Gallery (today's Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb), organized five international exhibitions under the name of "New Tendencies". The first, inauguratory exhibition (1961) was characterized by a wide variety of the topics treated. The painting was tautological and monochromatic, or oriented towards objects (Almir Mavignier, 'Zero' /Oto Piene, Heinz Mack/ and the 'Azimuth' /Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni/). Nevertheless, the works prevailed that were oriented towards systematical research (François Morellet, Karl Gerstner), and optical research of the object structure and surface (Marc Adrian, Julio Le Parc, Günther Uecker, Ivan Picelj, Gruppo "N" – Biasi, Massironi, Chiggio, Costa, Landi).

One might also recognize the beginnings of programmed and kinetic art, whose characteristic language would be marking New Tendencies as a movement already starting from the following exhibition (1963). It acts as kind of 'umbrella network' for many artists and critics and as well (Franch GRAV – Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, Spanish Equipo 57, Italian Gruppo N, Gruppo T, MID, Gruppo 63, Operativo R, Azimuth, Zero (Germany), Anonima (USA), Dvizenije (USSR) etc). Requirements for providing a scientific dimension of art shall give preference to experiments on visual perception based on Gestalt theory.

Already the following, third exhibition of New Tendencies (1965) examined relations between cybernetics and art (Abraham Moles). At the same time, the Tendencies movement faced its inside crisis caused by different approaches to social engagement throughout art practice. Julio Le Parc from the GRAV, won the award at the 23rd Venice Biennale

in 1966 to which many Tendencies members had a highly critical approach criticizing Le Parc because of his individual but not group presentation as well. The Responsive Eye exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1965 presented 123 works by 28 authors with many of the Tendencies authors taking part. The exhibition triggered dramatic discussions alongside Tendencies members because this exhibition excluded any social dimension of the represented works and focused on formal visual and retinal effects only (inaugurating market oriented 'op art').

The fourth Tendencies exhibition (1968/69) was marked by a further penetration of the idea of a theory of information and exact aesthetics. The artistic use of computers was a 'last try' of the Tendencies movement to synchronize its goals as the 'scientification of art' and 'bettering the society' and historical movement of 1968. The exhibition presented a broad spectrum of computer art only, hosting the participants from both cold war blocks. Computer sculptures, choreographies, objects and prints were exhibited. Four international colloquia were organized in 1968 and 1969, treating the topic of "Computers & Visual Research". In 1968 the Contemporary Art Gallery launched the "Bit international" magazine, as a bulletin of the said orientation (no. 1-9/1968-1972).

At the Tendencies 5 exhibition in 1973 were presented both sections of computer visual research and the conceptual art practice. At the time, those two art disciplines differed a lot especially because of their almost diagonal opposition in dealing with power structures in both terms of physical work production and approaches to the 'individuality vs. society' in the light of the 1968 revolution after-effects. Whatever of that gap between the contemporary art world and media art is, or is not, still existing, at least we are facing today the possibility of those two practices going hand in hand with each other.

Exhibition *I am Still Alive* (curator Darko Fritz; Mi2 and HDLU; Zagreb, 2000) presented early computer art and net.art next to each other. Here are excerpts from the correspondence of curator Darko Fritz and net artist Vuk Cosic, February 2000.

Vuk Cosic: The aspect I'm interested in regarding the bind between the New Low Tech Media and this project is the curator's (and artist's) *decision*, in the age of high tech, to deal with (and exhibit) low tech. I'm interested in the politics behind such a gesture that – in my little interpretation – grounds on the *refusal* to take the technological progress for a given. Increasingly I receive the impression that the new media art is moving in the backwash of the canonical aesthetic and methodological values, and that the New Low Tech Media is one of better ways to confront this (and still not to become a Unabomber). Research in the genesis of technology, and the genesis of the rapport between technology and art seems to me as the ineluctable first step ...

Darko Fritz: I'm interested in juxtaposing several valuational and temporal elements, and actually in seeing on the spot the degree of interaction of these works, what will happened ... the media archaeology is interesting because of these principal questions

of goals and means, *how and why* does the media art come about; how do art and technology relate to each other and, taken together, to society; question of strategies employed in a given period in the production, distribution and meaning of media art works (here exclusively those created using a computer). It seems interesting to me that in the years 1968-69, amidst the Cold war, it was possible to bring together, under the title "Computers and Visual Research", the authors and theoreticians from both blocks (USA, USSR, Argentina, West and East Europe). Back then files probably did not occupy more than 1Mb, yet graphics, films, objects, sculptures modelled in 3D, music, choreography were present... Bonacic placed a large object *on permanent display* on the frontispiece of a department store in Zagreb. It seems to me that nowadays the possibility of choice and movement is incomparably greater ... yet it is interesting to see the results ... in the period 1968-72 nine thematic issues of the media art publication 'bit international' were published.

Unfortunately, or rather fortunately, progressive art has always been predominantly a low budget enterprise ... 30 years ago computer art pieces were mostly created on a then high tech equipment in a low tech manifestation. The high tech equipment was mostly owned by scientific institutions, because at that time it was there that computers could be found (presumably in the army as well, and still later in the education, since there were no PCs back then). They were mostly created, regardless of the production location and the ideology, within the scientific establishment, prevailing in spare time and due to individual enthusiasm.

... at the conference "A new space for culture and society, new ideas in science and art", organised by the Council of Europe in 1996 in Prague, Mandelbrot recounted that once, as a young scientist, he was able only in an almost unofficial manner, at night, to upload his program for necessary processing on a then supercomputer ... smuggling ...

Excerpts from the Bit International magazine [no. 1-9/1968-1972] and Tendencies 4 exhibition catalogue [1968/69], both published in Zagreb by Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

... According to H.W. Franke the total informational capacity of the consciousness is 160 bits. This value is deduced from the fact that an information that has entered the consciousness has 16 bits and remains in it for ten seconds. An information theory finding decisive for the learning processes, as well as for the transfer of the aesthetic information patterns, is that only around 0,7 bit can be converted from consciousness into memory. ...

Herbert W. Franke: Cybernetic foundations of programmed art, Bit international no. 2: Computers and visual research, Zagreb, 1968.

... and that in future the development of messages and means of communication, messages between human and machines, between machines and human, between machines and machines, is going to play an increasingly important role.

N. Wiener: Human use of human beings, 1954.; an introductory quote in the catalogue 'tendencije 4' (1968/69), Zagreb, 1970.

... pure technology is always more interesting and more beautiful than the art amalgamated with technology. ...

Statement by the collective Anonima in May 1968, catalogue 'tendencije 4' (1968/69), Zagreb, 1970.

... But the machines already approached the man, faster than the man approached the machines. ...

Abraham A. Moles, introductory speech at the conference Computers and Visual Research, Zagreb, 1968. Bit International no. 2, 1968.

... However, while the analogous computer works on the constantly variable values of a system analogous to the problem, a digital computer autonomously computes in accordance with the set program. It is the discovery of digital computer that unfolds the most significant field of computer art to date. ... Objects created by Vladimir Bonacic exclude the chance by means of a pseudo-random polynomial exhibited on a 36 meter long series of 18 objects placed on the facade of the NAMA department store in Zagreb. Finally, this exhibition should not be understood as a domination of technology, but rather as an effort to overcome the new technology and use it to achieve new results in the field of visual.

Boris Kelemen: Computer and visual research, catalogue 'tendencije 4' (1968 – 69), Zagreb, 1970.

... We concede that the next twenty years could be spent by artists in exploring and assimilating the potential of existing computers and their peripherals. ... A great deal of computer art embodies the limitation of existing techniques. The aesthetic demands of artists necessarily lead them to seek an alliance with the most advanced research in natural and artificial intelligence.

Gordon Hyde, Jonathan Benthall, Gustav Metzger: Zagreb Manifesto, 1969, Bit International: Dijalog sa strojem, 1971.

... if the households are going to be connected through the television screens with the central computer units, as it is nowadays the case with the phones, then nothing will stand in the way of the possibility to present computer graphics by means of a screen. That possibility seems today utopian.

Herbert W. Franke: Drustveni aspekti kompjutorske umjetnosti [Social aspects of computer art], 1969, Bit International: Dialogue with the machine, 1971.

... the first award winners in the now annual computer art contest organised by the 'Computers and Automation' were the member of the U.S ballistic team. There is no doubt that in the computer art the real avant-garde was army. ... Sculpture is the utilization of existing forces. That is clearly seen in Egyptian monument sculpture. In the project 'Five Screens with Computer' I am concerned with tremendous power allied to the most delicate control; this, you will agree, is a distinguishing mark of much of today's techniques. ... The sculpture should be sited as a central concourse between three very large blocks of flats ... The sculpture is to be regarded as a focal point of the community. From

the windows of the flats, people will get views of the screens, and their elements in flight. ... The computer used to run the sculpture can also be used for various tasks connected with functioning of the flats. By means of telephone connections, it can be used as the local reference library by the inhabitants of the flats. ...

Gustav Metzger, exposition at the conference Computers and Visual Research, Zagreb, 1969, Bit International: Dijalog sa strojem, 1971.

... T.V. will be overshadowed by a C.V. (Computer vision) system combining and extending the present features of both computer and television systems removing the barrier of non-participation by the public. With increased free time, greater interest and activity we will be able to enjoy, and development of the arts and new tendencies should be in that direction.

Petar Milojevc: xxx, Bit International: Dialogue with the machine, 1971.

... Shouldn't the information aesthetics be able to use certain modelling techniques? The information it should model is the aesthetic information, such as it appears in nature and art. However, the dependency of aesthetic information on processes should be modelled as well, while conceiving the processes themselves as temporarily dependent information. ...

Georg Nees: Computer graphics and visual art, Bit International no. 2: Computers and Visual Research, Zagreb, 1968.

Q & A

Lecture:

"I'm Still Alive": New Tendencies – Media and Computer Art of the Sixties

Darko Fritz

Q: If we speak using the terms of computer art of the sixties and early seventies, we can ascertain a kind of noncommunication between so-called sixties activists, anti-sixty-eighters, leftists, and neo-constructivism. The use and invention of the PC connected these two schools of thought, which resulted in the appearance of today's net.art. Were there any key people who were a part of this neo-constructivist, practically pro-state orientation, against the computer stream, and were there people who linked the two?

A: I think that in the sixties the neo-constructivists were the true avant-garde and as such, from the social point of view, were uncompromised. In the West their committed (new) leftist political orientation set them in opposition to the mainstream, while several positive examples in the former Yugoslavia, also avant-gardists, managed to participate in (sometimes high-budget) state-financed projects, achieving exceptional results. Neo-constructivist and lumino-kinetic art used new technologies, not for informatinal, but rather

for robotic or similar purposes to achieve kinetic qualities, employing various forms of serially produced art works and the use of then new materials. The use of informatical electronic technology united these two streams in the fullest sense through early video art. Conceptual artists of the day saw video as an opposition to mainstream television which was seen as a system of repression and manipulation of information, with which I agree, particularly today. They conceived a utopian vision of the use of video technology which on occasion was realized via local (cable) television, and with this new system of production and distribution participated in decentralizing the system of information. The promise of early video art was fulfilled by the Internet revolution of the nineties. In the sixties it wasn't possible to do this using computer networks, for the simple reason that they didn't exist, apart from in the embryonic phases of experiments. We must remember that the Internet was developed as a cold-war era military weapon to be used in place of telephone communication in the case of atomic war.

However, to return to the culture and art of the sixties, one school of thought believed in social progress via scientific and technological advancement, while the other favoured anarchism, individualism, a return to nature, direct revolution, and so on. In reality both were leftwing in their political orientation, they wanted change and the betterment of society, but looked to achieve these goals using vastly different methods and means. Only in the nineties did this crossover occur, chiefly via net.art, a fusion of political activism which employed direct action, conceptual art, and technological consciousness. There are numerous examples, and here I would isolate two characteristic works. The first is the work of the RTMark group, where they pass themselves off as being representatives of the WTO (World Trade Organization) and in doing so are invited to economic congresses (<http://theyesmen.org>). The second work is also of a subversive nature, Alexei Shulgin's 'FuckU-FuckMe' (<http://www.fu-fme.com>) is made up of an advertising campaign for a product that doesn't actually exist – hardware which enables physical cyber sex. The site received 50,000 orders within a year! Even Croatian Playboy wrote about his product in an article about cyber sex believing it was a real product. Unfortunately every avant-garde dies young, and thus the positive energy of nineties net.art in time lost its initial enthusiasm and sunk into the mainstream cultural industry, becoming institutionalized.

Q: Is this the problem of possessing a presumed work of art?

A: Early net.art actually skipped mediation between communication of the work of art and the public, without an intermediary, and by its nature was free. The question is what can be offered to the still traditionally-orientated art market, a market which gravitates towards objects. To this effect, they devised various strange and largely unnecessary forms and compromises. In media art, as far as money is concerned, barring a few exceptions, things usually boil down to them being used by the newly-appointed establishment: working for nothing, and artists having to be happy with being asked to participate in a project, that they're traveling the world and that for this time their living expenses are covered.

Q: Talking about computer works from the sixties, were there any indications of inter-activeness? Works produced were based on the computer used as a medium, and had two-dimensional graphics.

A: There were also various other forms, three-dimensional sculptures, choreography, music and film. During the lecture I showed a computer film by Tomislav Mikulić. Almost all lumino-kinetic and neo-constructivist works from the first part of the New Tendencies movement involved interaction with the viewer (in contrast to traditional fine arts) via a well-conceived and conditioned perception of the work, whether with the help of electronic mobile parts of the work, its position in space, or the retinal effects of a two-dimensional surface or relief. Sometimes viewers were directly invited to physically change the structure of the exhibited work. A good degree of interactiveness can be observed in the work 'Compos Hobby Box' by the 'Compos' group [<http://darkofritz.net/curator/alive/pix/m01veen.jpg>], where there is a users' manual suggesting computer generated possibilities of ways in which we can create a composition of given coloured rectangles. The work emerged in the late sixties and used informatical vocabulary: user, manual, matrix, program, and object.

In Gustav Metzger's unrealized 1969 project 'Five screens with computer', residents of three large neighbouring residential blocks were to operate an installation via telephone. Among the quotations I have taken from Bit International magazine you can find one from Petar Manojlović about C.V. (Computer vision), where he very clearly foresees the Internet, only under a slightly different name. It was suggested that two-way communication would be developed via telephone/TV cables – meaning, interactive communication. In this way the understanding of interactiveness was transferred from the one artistic object to one 'user' relationship, to a broader informatical and social level.

In kuda.org, 16. 07. 2002.