

Amnesia International : Early Computer Art Within the Tendencies Network [1961 - 1973] and Bit International Magazine [1968 - 1973]

Title	Amnesia International
Subtitle	Early Computer Art Within the Tendencies Network [1961 - 1973] and Bit International Magazine [1968 - 1973]
Lead-in / Abstract	Tendencies 4 exhibition [1968 - 69] presenting international [both East and West!] computer art and Bit International magazine [1968 - 1973] on media theory, both from Zagreb, Croatia are wiped out of media art history.
Participants and speakers	Fritz, Darko (HR / NL)
Short biography of participants	Darko Fritz is a multimedia artist, curator, media archeologist and graphic designer. He studied architecture at Zagreb University and completed post-graduate studies at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam (media art department). His work filling the gap between contemporary art practices and media art culture. Fritz was a founding member of the artist collectives Cathedral (1988), The Imitation of Life Studio (1987 - 1990), Young Croatian Electronic Films (1991) and The Future State of Balkania (1998). He organized following exhibitions: "Graphic Design Culture in The Netherlands" (1999), "I am Still Alive" (international Internet art and pioneer computer art of the 1960s; 2000), CLUB.NL (Dutch contemporary art; 2000), "Lights from Zagreb" (interactive light installations; 2001) and <dis.location> (2003). Since 2002 he works as editor in the field of media art on the virtual portal of Croatian culture, Culturenet.
Full text	<p>... <i>Technology progresses. Art changes. It never progresses. ...</i> <i>Statement of the collective Anonima in May 1968, catalogue 'Tendencies 4' (1968 - 69), Zagreb, 1970.</i></p> <p>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?</p>

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, inaugural 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 and 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. Exhibition 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 happen ... 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, prevalently 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 Internattional magazine [no. 1-9 / 1968-1972] and Tendencies 4 exhibiton catalogue [1968/69]

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: Društveni 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.

Related internet addresses

<http://darkofritz.net>

<http://darkofritz.net/curator/alive/eng/index.htm>