

A Medial Perspective to Ecological Concerns

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Based on projects from the exhibition *Ecomedia. Ecological Strategies in Today's Art* (2007 at the Edith-Russ-Site for Media Art in Oldenburg) the presentation is devoted to the topic of ecological change, which, among other causes, has been brought about by human interventions in existing ecosystems. Environmental catastrophes and global warming are the results and consequences of a highly civilized and industrialised way of life. Ecological rethinking and long-term action are among today's most important tasks if we want to avoid further damage to the environment and thus to our own living space. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, the authors of the book *The Death of Environmentalism*, describe the present day as the post environmental era. Instead of recounting scenarios full of gloom and doom, they emphasise the necessity of constructive political policies and a positive definition of the remaining manoeuvring possibilities to achieve a sustainable development: "Environmentalists have spent the last forty years telling people what they can't have, can't do and can't be. We need to offer a vision to the entire human race about what we can have, can do and can become. We need to speak as much to people's hopes as to their fears."¹

With the exhibition *Ecomedia* the curators (Sabine Himmelsbach, Karin Ohlenschlaeger and Yvonne Volkart) tried to expand the political, social and economic debate by art's voice that questions our behaviour and demands that we deal respectfully with our environment and natural resources and which shows us the possibilities of how we can make change a reality. With eighteen different artistic positions, the exhibition wanted to show what art — especially media art — approaches and strategies are capable of contributing to these questions and problems.² Works of art have been presented that deal with the complex field of ecology, with sustainability, with renewable energy, resources, global foodstuff transportation, as well as visionary approaches to solving the problems related to these subject matters. Various aspects of ecology, i.e. the science that examines the interrelation of organisms to each other and to their environment, have been

demonstrated and discussed. The ambivalent and often paradoxical relationship between man and nature is at the forefront here, as is the role, played by technological developments regarding the environment and how the electronic media can be responsibly used as a means to communicate information about the condition and demands of the ecosystem. In addition, our lifestyle, the wasteful dealings with fossil resources as well as recent social and urban developments have been critically examined and considered.

The ecology movement of the 1970s and 1980s had already given up the concept of nature as a natural given. The biologist and feminist Donna Haraway speaks of the "reinvention of nature,"³ and describes the changes and expansions of ecological systems into which man has intervened with the help of genetic engineering and



Figure 1: Christoph Keller, *The Whole Earth*, 2007
Installation view, Edith-Russ Site for Media Art, Oldenburg

cloning. The work *GenTerra* by the Critical Art Ensemble shown in *Ecomedia* uses this theme as its starting point. Based on participatory dealings with new technologies

and transmitted via performances and workshops, CAE attempts to advance the cause of rational dealings in the interaction between nature and technology and to criticize the hysterical rejection of any type of technical means. The image of the earth as the Blue Planet is the point of reference for German artist Christoph Keller in his work *The Whole Earth*. A video projection on a

viewers into the projects. In a society influenced by medial and electronic networks, artists increasingly provide insights into scientific technological world designs. They create action spaces in accordance with visionary approaches and risk innovative looks at well-known facts and problems. New York artist Andrea Polli, for example, utilizes the interpretation of scientific



Figure 2: Transnational Temps, EcoScope, 2007
Installation view, Edith Russ Site for Media Art, Oldenburg

weather balloon shows white clouds gliding by against a blue sky. Every two minutes, however, a roaring aircraft pierces the hovering sphere. The idyllic image is already a fiction that Keller deconstructs in his installation in a very poetic way.

Many of the works shown in *Ecomedia* are devoted to the potentials offered by the use of the media to comprehend ecological questions. They draw on the methods and results of scientific research and utilize global communications technologies to actively integrate

data for video and sound installations developed in an intense cooperation with scientists, urban planners, and meteorologists. Polli translated the international measurements dealing with air pollution or the weather into striking experience spaces in which the abstract data can come into contact with emotion by means of images and sounds.

Another example for this approach are the projects by American artist Natalie Jeremijenko. Her works have their basis at many different points of intersection — the

communication between man and animal, the changed living conditions of man and animal in the urban space, as well as social and environmental influences and their manipulation by means of genetic engineering. Her works join engineering, biology, and art into a unit to deal with socio-political questions and thereby offer visionary solutions. All of her projects actively address the viewer and involve him socially. The cure is therefore not the credo of her new *Environmental Health Clinic*, which she was presenting in Oldenburg, but rather the invitation to get involved: “You walk out with a prescription not for pharmaceuticals, but for action.”

The works gathered in the exhibition are concerned with calling attention to pressing ecological questions and contemporary problems with the intent of achieving positive changes. The focus of the works chosen for inclusion in this exhibition is their media reflective approach. The employment of techniques from electronic media permits innovative collaborations between art and science. The recording of data, the visualisation of strategies and making scientific information audible make new worlds of perception and insights possible in which a wide audience can participate. The

project *EcoScope*, which has been produced for the exhibition by the artist group Transnational Temps, creates a “telematic forum for public opinion about the environment using internet media. It leverages scientific visualisation, time-lapse satellite imagery, landscape photography, and environmental journalism to create a framework for conversation and discovery.”⁴

Media art can contribute to making knowledge about complex structures and systems available to many people by transforming the abstract into sensorial information, images, and sounds.

In the future, the task will be to master the challenge of collective co-existence in a complex network and to gauge which actions are forward-looking in terms of further developments. While it could not be the exhibition’s task to present solutions for all of these difficult questions which are of concern to everyone, the participating artists and curators wished to create a space for reflection, exchange, and critical debate in addition to presenting projects and suggestions for action that make views to future utopias possible.

1 Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, “FAQ: Post-environmentalism”. In: Max Andrews (ed.): *Land, Art. A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, RSA and Arts Council England, Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester 2006, p. 199.

2 The exhibition title was inspired by the lecture *Eco-Media. How the Natural World is Transforming the Nature of Media* delivered by the American artist Andrea Polli during the symposium at the ISEA (Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts) Festival 2006 in San José, California.

3 Donna Haraway. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York and London: Routledge.

4 Transnational Temps project statement.