

ART IN THE AGE OF NETWORKS

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The panel 'Art in the Age of Networks' brought together outstanding experts in the field of digital networked art. Coming from various backgrounds (art practice, curating, network/media theory), the speakers discussed the changing notion of art and its relevance in a digital networked environment. Instead of taking a modernist approach and looking at media specificity, the panel focused on networked art in the tradition of the historical avant-garde understanding art as a forming element of society. The framing questions included: How can art contribute to building a new society? How can the values from free software be implemented in cultural production? How do artists contribute to building independent infrastructures?

Based on the assumption that art is not a fixed concept but rather continuously undergoes mutations as the result of permanent social negotiations and media shifts, the panel took a closer look at how artists today are dealing with the conditions of the networked society and what strategies they are developing to address them. The contributions complemented each other and offered a theoretical framework as well as relevant practice examples.

In his talk entitled "The cultural condition of digital networks," Felix Stalder examined the socio-technical transformation within digital networks and cultural practices adapted to these changing conditions. In particular, he focused on the fact that the number of potential cultural references has exploded. Billions of images, text documents, audio and video files of the most heterogeneous kind are available with relative ease through search engines, databases, shadow libraries and official repositories. Traditional cultural institutions – publishers, museums, archives and the like – are no longer capable of maintaining the boundaries between the "relevant" and the "trivial." This task has been generalized to everyone.

Also, artists respond to this scenario and they are reacting in two ways. One is to internalize in the work an ever-growing number of references necessary to make sense of the work; that is, their works are producing the context in which they want to be seen. In other words, the works become networks of references and relationships themselves. This was discussed by referring to the work *Là-bas* (2014) by the French artist Saadane Afif. The other way is that artists are focusing on the practices of selecting and relating directly by building platforms and institutions of all kinds that enable this practice to be oriented towards different goals. In the process, they are establishing cultural commons as resources for and destiny of, this kind of work that is seen as necessarily collaborative.

Sarah Cook continued by contributing an art historical and art theoretical perspective. She started with the reflection of a brief history of art and networked practices, from early net.art of the

kind produced by M.River and T.Whid Art Associates in the late 1990s, to when Simon Pope curated the group exhibition *Art for Networks* in the UK in 2004, to today and noted that it is key to understand what kind of network one is talking about. In contemporary art as well as in media theory, there would often be a confusion between what is just a network and what is more properly understood as a community. One way to overcome this problem would be to clarify what the purpose of the network is; after all, the network will only function as long as it has something to communicate.

In the following, Sarah Cook discussed a number of art projects that exemplify various artistic ways of dealing with the notion of the network. Works such as Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie's *A Hypertext Journal* (1994), a reenactment – with early blog – of a historic tour of the islands of Scotland, demonstrate the idea that a network might sit or build upon an existing platform for communication, such as the web or mobile telephony and might not even be digital. In her PhD thesis on socially engaged new media art, curator Ele Carpenter argued that:

"Different media platforms allow different scales of engagement and broadcast. Socially engaged art platforms are the located structure of localised activity, whereas new media art platforms are operating systems or programmes which enable participatory engagement or collaborative production over geographic distances. The characteristics of the platform determine which tools or systems are selected for a particular project." (Ele Carpenter, PhD Thesis, 2007).

This is evident in Graham Harwood's project *Coal Fired Computers* (2010) or the YoHa (Graham Harwood and his collaborators) project *Invisible Airs* (2011), which investigated the expenditure of Bristol City Council using the data found in the databases to run a series of contraptions which allowed users to experience the financial information physically. Both show how different audiences from varied knowledge areas can be brought into conversation about place, technology, agency and personal experience. As Graham Harwood has written of these projects, it may be that the artwork is itself a network:

"If we decide to follow a Simondonian logic and focus on how the artwork comes to be, how it individuates from its pre-existence and how this constructs its relations, then it is consistent that the work might exist simultaneously as a pedagogy, a campaign, an intellectual enquiry, software, hardware, an art object, network and process." (Graham Harwood, PhD Thesis, 2013)

Following this line of reasoning, sometimes the key thing artists can do is expose existing networks through their interventions or

contribute to the building of new networked infrastructures by raising questions about existing infrastructures – modifying, hacking and re-scaling them.

Cook's central argument was that artists working with networked technologies demonstrate that there is a potential for understanding art as an agent for social and political change, on the basis of their employment of digital networked technologies. She ended by stating that in the case of artists engaging in networked technologies there is potential for a greater shift from consumer to producer, from user to developer, from thinking of technology as a tool to considering it as a way of engaging with others about the shared concerns of living in a digitally networked environment.

Relating to Stalder's thesis that the overflow of information, the overflow of ambiguous references and the failure of conventional ordering systems opens up two possible ways for artists of dealing with the situation – the creation of individual reference systems and individual systems of meaning on the one hand and what he called "the archive strategy" – the opening up of a new potential of reference systems by building 'meta structures,' on the other hand. Cornelia Sollfrank's contribution clearly provided examples for the latter.

In her ongoing artistic research project 'Giving What You Don't Have,' in which Sollfrank explores the relationship between art and the commons, she puts a special emphasis on artistic projects that create meta structures and new ordering systems such as archives, communities and platforms as well as various devices. Under the subtitle 'Art as Infrastructure/ Tool/ Service,' Sollfrank screened excerpts of filmed interviews she did with artists and used the material to discuss a number of questions. The projects she introduced in more detail were UbuWeb and Libre Graphics.

UbuWeb is an online repository of avant-garde art created by NY-based poet and writer Kenneth Goldsmith. UbuWeb is a massive collection of what Goldsmith calls avant-garde art, comprising thousands of works of concrete poetry, sound poetry, sound art, experimental film, multimedia archives, video, dance and a variety of other genres and formats. All works can be viewed online and downloaded. The archive is running on zero budget; there are simply no resources for copyright clearance procedures. Thus, UbuWeb is as much about the legal and social ramifications of its self-created distribution and archiving system as it is about the content hosted on the site. Also aaaaaarg.org is an open source platform for freely sharing content: books and texts. The repository includes media theory, philosophy, art history and theory and architecture and has been created as a working tool for the Public School – a self-organized educational project which started in LA in 2007 and now has branches in 12 cities all over the world. aaaaaarg.org is the central tool for the creation and sharing of knowledge within Public School and produces project-related communities around their reading material. The interest of the creators of the project primarily lies in the appropriation of systems

and structures – such as gallery, library or school – rather than simply content. The last example presented by Sollfrank was the work of Belgian artist Femke Snelting, who develops projects at the intersection of design, feminism and free software, thus investigating the intimate relationship between form, content and technology or more specifically the interrelations between digital tools and artistic practice. The ecosystem the artist is working in is called Libre Graphics and consists of graphic designers, programmers, free software tools, open document formats and practices of sharing and reflecting which applies the thinking and philosophy of free software to graphic design practice. Art, here, comes into play as a reference system for integrating practice and discourse beyond the usability paradigm.

General questions for the discussion following the presentations were derived from this last research project by Sollfrank but were applied to networked art in general: Do the artists use symbolic means/forms to address the issues of the networked society or do they create actually functioning forms/units, such as archives, platforms and communities? What do these different approaches represent in terms of concepts of art? Do the various projects suggest new forms of organization or new models for the circulation and distribution of knowledge? What forms of social relations do they enable/activate/produce? What role does technology play? Is it an integral part of the works or is it the theme? What forms of agency do the projects exemplify? The discussion of these questions was eventually connected to the underlying idea of understanding art as an agent for social and political change on the basis of digital networked technologies.