Re:place, Berlin 15.-18. Nov. 2007

Panel 10: „Cybernetic Histories of Artistic Practices“
Moderation: Geoff Cox
Panellists: David Link, Kristoffer Gansing, Brian Reffin Smith

Although it was the last panel on the agenda of a tightly packed 3-days conference it turned out to be one of the most lively where quite a few provocative and inspiring questions were raised (or vigorously repeated). It was also one of the rare panels where the moderator (Geoff Cox) was not just content with introducing the topic by simply citing the CV's of the panellists. With his proposition of „Software Art Has No History“ he undertook the task of presenting the given subject „Cybernetic Histories of Artistic Practicies“ in a broader context by referring to materialist conceptions of historical theories where the constructedness of historical processes and human agency have developped into central parameters and thus he was shedding a specific light on the dialectics of performativity and emergent phenomena. Cox was further highlighting the productive analogy between historical processes and the operations of software and thereby pleading not to place practices like ‚software art' into tight arthistorical straightjackets by forever creating further historicising genres.
The connections between cybernetics and artistic or, more precisely, emergent everyday practices was then presented in two computer-archaeological case studies by David Link (Memory for Love Letters. Computer Archaeology of a Very Early Program) and Kristoffer Gansing (Humans Thinking like Machines – Incidental Media Art in the Swedish Welfare State). Both speakers were seperately looking at different occurrences in the early software/hardware history when engineers and programmers were experimenting with the cybernetic machines to produce something other than what they were originally designed for. David Link gave the example of the pioneer software programmer Christopher Strachey who used the MARK 1 computer of the university of Manchester to run the first ever text generating program in 1953 to create randomly generated love letters. Link has sucessfully managed only recently to tediously reconstruct the original program in an emulation of the original computer. This effort led him to point at the necessary entanglement of theory and practice with regard to the reconstructive processes of historical memory when it comes to the preservation of such fragile ‚objects' like software.
Kristoffer Gansing was presenting a case study of what he called ‚incidental media art' having a special glance at cybernetic feedback relationships between man and machine. He was likewise offering an alternative reading of everyday creativity realized on early mainframe computers by

engineers, taking place within the walls of workplaces of public administration offices in the mid 1960ies. Employees of the Swedish tax administration were writing code on punch cards to be processed and finally printed on a noisy IBM 1403 line printer as the output machine to produce music to please a group of visiting Tanzanian exchange students. This kind of work place music on a „singing printer“ seems to have been a widespread phenomenon at the time. Gansing placed the example of everyday accidental practice in line with the subversion and appropriation methods supposedly integral to media art practices. As the African students were hearing the new national anthem of the newly formed state of Tanzania Gansing placed the example also in the political context of computerisation and colonisation/de-colonisation. Link and Gansing were both stressing the fact that on the methodological level the reconstruction of their case studies was only possible through interviewing involved persons still living, pointing at the importance of methods of oral history for media art historical research in general. A critical comment from the public raised the question whether these war- and business machines turned into music- and poetry machines did not rather belong to strategies of humanising technology, which would turn the argument of the so called subversive appropriation into an integrative trap of human-machine relationships (first order cybernetics?). The thought tied in neatly with the presentation of the last speaker.

Brian Reffin Smith delivered the literally final speech of the panel in a hilarious and equally sardonic conference performance (Hijack. How the Computer was Wasted for Art). He was passionately denouncing the ongoing mystification of the computer by artists, scientists and art-critics alike since the early 1970ies and the progressive culture of the spectacle fed by the capitalistic IT-industries since the mid 1990ies. He was at the same time regretting the diguise and neglection of the aesthetic potential of computer-based art of the 1960ies. Likewise he was deploring the fuzzy use of the term cybernetics in new media art discourse. Therefore he was pleading for a consistent concentration on the basics and a profound critical distance towards the state-of-the-art technologies and the speed of their development which in their present aesthetic exploration by artists at best bring forward digital handicraft, but not art. In the following discussion the question remained unanswered whether the moody presentation was able to serve its purpose or whether a more theoretical approach would have lead to a loophole out of the self-referential feedback loop of „cybernetic irony“.