

Comparative Histories of Art Institutions

Reviewer: jonCates



In this review of the Comparative Histories of Art Institutions panel moderated by Stephan Kovats at re:place 2007 in Berlin, i will begin at the ending, discussing the panel presentations by Lioudmila Voropai, Renata Sukaityte, Christoph Klütsch and Catherine Hamel in reverse chronological order.

Catherine Hamel's poetic presentation "Crossing Into The Border - an intersection of vertical and horizontal migration" wove a loosely knit fabric of connections that lead me to reconsider the previous presentations as well as the general structures of panels and conferences such as re:place. What are the intended purposes of such panel presentations, collected together and organized under more or less artificially conceived themes such as "Comparative Histories of Art Institutions"? Are such panels simply re-inscriptive social performances of expert academic identities in order to further legitimize or establish these voices? Are panel presentations such as these intended to be moments of actual information exchange and sharing? If distribution of knowledge systems is intended then, how open should these forms of distribution and exchange be? If presenters have materials that are freely available online or in print form, what function or opportunities does the physical panel presentation especially offer? And how does the physical arrangement of the panel as a line, a border, between presenters and presented-to, construct our expectations of and relations to these presentations?

Hamel took up a discussion outside of what could be considered an explicitly Media Art discourse. Articulating the unstable war-torn position of the Beirut National Museum's non-digital, analog, traditional collection of Art and historical archaeological artifacts, Hamel charted the movement of this collection from being excavated to being reburied as a protective survival strategy during heavy bombing to being excavated in times of cease-fire or relative peace. This central metaphor of movement between being buried and recovered could have provided a link to Media Art theorypractices or histories but Hamel did not take this path. Instead, she poetically illustrated her talk with slides composed of her own photos and drawings, while thinking through the movement/migration patterns of survivors of war, both in the cases of people and the classical/traditional art objects/artifacts they unearthed, buried and rediscovered.

Digital but definitively not "talking about Media Art", Christoph Klütsch preceded Hamel. Klütsch introduced his sprawling "The roots and influences of information aesthetics in Germany, Canada, US, Brazil and Japan" presentation with a series of qualifications. These qualifying statements included Klütsch conceding the fact that 20 minutes would not be enough time to fully discuss the histories of Information Aesthetics nor the nationally specific histories that can be traced through Germany, Canada, US, Brazil and Japan. He offered instead a slide with an image of his recent book as a solution for those interested in the topics we would briefly discuss. Klütsch also began his talk by clarifying that he supported Andreas Broeckmann's semantic separation of Media and Art in his "Media, Art..." rather than "Media Art" description of the theme of re:place 2007. In support of furthering this separation, Klütsch focused on the area or genre of "Information Aesthetics" which he positioned as a distinct field related to "Computer Art" rather than "Media Art". Quickly outlining the first 5 years of

Computer Art from 1963 to 1968 through the lens of Information Aesthetics, Klütsch claimed that these first 5 years were the blueprint for all Computer Art that followed. In a series of unreadable slides, far too dense with information that could literally not be seen from the second row of the theater due to the Information Aesthetics of his design, Klütsch named complex genealogies, verbally criss-crossing points of origin without anchoring these family trees in any identifiable visual diagrams.

Before Klütsch began his attempts to distinguish himself and his research from Media Art Histories, Renata Sukaityte continued a thematic thread of New Media Art Histories from the former Soviet States in her presentation “Electronic art in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: the interplay of local, regional and global processes”. Sukaityte quietly described a set of nationally specific circumstances starting in the early 1990's. In a continued line of research from the first presenter, Sukaityte identified The Soros Foundation as having a profoundly influential role in Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian New Media Art developments of the early/mid 1990's. As she stated, The Soros Foundation promoted specific kinds of art and personal relationships through their strategic funding initiatives. Later, in the question and answer session, Sukaityte was criticized for placing too much emphasis on Soros, as if she had intended to forward a promotional institutional history in the service of Soros. In response to this criticism, Sukaityte admitted that she may have moved too quickly in her overview. Still, she had earlier explained that New Media Art organizations and artists in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were simultaneously embedded in and mobilizing critiques of centralized contemporary art centers. She described a networked resistance to centralization, especially the centralization represented by the Soros funding. Sukaityte stated that organizations refused funding to stay independent and flexible while establishing temporary media labs that functioned as continuous experimental projects to develop critical discourses as well as the development of new tools for the production of their work.

Lioudmila Voropai's presentation on the “Institutionalisation of Media Art in the Post-Soviet Space: The Role of Cultural Policy and Socioeconomic Factors” navigated similar trajectories from the perspective of several specific Russian organizations and situations. Setting the stage for Sukaityte's presentation, Voropai foregrounded Media Art Histories of New Media Art and organizations that actively resisted or critiqued institutionalization. Voropai clearly stated that there can exist no institutions without professionalization and the process of professionalization leads not only to institutionalization but also to bureaucratization. As she illustrated, movement along this path is fueled by and follows the flows of capital. Voropai named The Soros Foundation's funding structures and strategies as sources of her Media Art Historical analysis, renaming The Soros Foundation as “The Soros Conspiracy”. Voropai described The Soros Conspiracy as a deeply influential funding effort with socioeconomic/political goals of forming a monopoly on cultural work made with new technologies in order to secure control of the best and most long lasting propaganda tool in the Post-Soviet Space. Voropai utilized specific places in the Post-Soviet cultural space, drawing examples from Moscow and St Petersburg. In Voropai's reading, no budget and conceptual net.art is where Russian New Media Art excelled in direct and intentional contrast and opposition to the institutional and capitalist desires of The Soros Conspiracy. Referencing the work of Alexi Shulgina in Moscow and Gallery 21 in St Petersburg, she expressed the event, project and process orientation of these internationally recognized New Media Art Histories.

From Voropai to Sukaityte's presentations, the Comparative Histories of Art Institutions panel began with clearly comprehensible links between presenters, the theme of the panel and the larger framework of re:place 2007's supposed emphasis on specific local Media Art Histories. As the panel presentations continued with Klütsch's attempt to distill his book project and then Hamel's poetic traversals of “personal cartographies” in which crossing lines repeatedly becomes “a form of resistance”, I returned to, internally, remembering Stephan Kovats' introductory statements for the panel. Kovats' reminded us that when new (Media) Art institutions are formed they, through their formation, engender their own institutional critiques. As such, I wonder, when a panel like this might be formed around the questions I began this short review with. When might a panel like this take up the responsibilities of critiquing itself or the conference context as an institution?