

Re:place conference 2007

Panel 5: Place Studies: Media Art Histories

Moderation: Andreas Broeckmann

Daniel Palmer (AU)

Media Art and Its Critics in the Australian Context

Ryszard W. Kluszcynski (PL)

From Media Art to Techno Culture. Reflections on the transformation of the Avant-Gardes (The Polish Case)

Caroline Seck Langill (CAN)

Corridors of Practice I: Technology and Performance Art on the North American Pacific Coast in the 1970s and Early 1980s

Machiko Kusahara (JP)

A turning point in Japanese Avant-Garde Art: 1964-1970

Review by Eleni Michailidi, MediaArHistories MA, Donau University, Krems, Austria

Re:place conference's Panel 5 Place Studies: Media Art Histories traced some of the media art histories that can be told in a local context, raising the complex issue of how national and local processes relate to broader national and international media art contexts. As media art's global networks have had an acute impact on the development of local artistic and critical practices, it is important to analyze their complex interaction and influences in order to understand the different ways in which media art develops.

The first paper to be presented, Daniel Palmer's *Media Art and Its Critics in the Australian Context*, focused on critical reception and coverage of media art in Australia. According to Palmer, the reasons for the Australian media art scene being marginalized in its local context, even though it has long gained recognition in global networks, lie in the lack of media art criticism on a local level. Having studied thoroughly the reception and coverage of electronic and media art over the past three decades, Palmer reached the conclusion that Australian art critics have shown little or no interest at all in media art, and this merely on conservative aesthetic ground. The lack of critical discourse contributed to media art holding only a marginal position in the Australian contemporary arts scene, being closely tied to patterns of funding and institutional structures. Until 1998, when the New Media Arts Fund was established, media arts support in Australia was lavishly funded, even though the vitality of the scene had managed to draw public attention upon itself since the early '90s. Even though critical frameworks changed to an extent in the process, and mainstream criticism finally came to celebrate the potential of new media art, still there has been little reflection on identity and content. The process of media art's institutionalization that has been recently taking place (New Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, 2002), brings to the surface these issues of identifying and contextualizing media art.

Palmer also highlights the important role that video played in the development of media art in Australia, especially during the late '80s. Video art is still the strongest connection between media art and mainstream contemporary art. Apart from one more representational medium, video was primarily considered as a communications medium. It can be therefore argued that video art is part of a broader shift from

representational to more presentational modes (in the sense that the viewer participates in the space of the work).

In the following presentation, Ryszard W. Kluszcynski drew examples from the post-war Polish media art scene to illustrate the process of transformation of media art avant-gardes from the perspective of media studies, to a perspective closer to cultural studies. Referring in detail to the development of the artistic practices of *The Workshop of the Film Form (1970-'77)* and *The Central Office of Technical Culture (CUKT, 1995)* as case studies, Kluszcynski noted that, despite the differences, there is a continuum between both collective's practices; the Workshop's anticipating the culture analysis, and its conceptual and analytical approach preparing the CUKT project's tactics.

While the whole picture of post-war Polish avant-garde media scene is way more complex, Kluszcynski chose to focus only on these two examples, in order to better illustrate his point. Through the clear juxtaposition of these two different practices and strategies, one can clearly see the shift of media art from self analysis to an analysis of the social environment, from showing interest in the technological basis of art to focusing on the technological foundations of culture. Unfortunately, and given the limited time frame of 20 minutes, there was no insight on how the political and historical context affected the avant-garde, an aspect that would be most interesting to explore in the Polish case.

Caroline Seck Langill traced the history of electronic media art practices that developed at various centres in US and Canada, along the axis of the North American Pacific Coast. Langill chose not to explore these developments from the scope of locality, but by tracking a 'corridor of practice' instead.

Starting with the Vancouver Art Gallery's 1969 Intermedia exhibition, the collective's first group show, Langill focused on US American and Canadian artists that were active on the North American Pacific Coast in the 1970s and early 1980s, working in similar, performative modes with electronic media.

Communication of ideas and practices was frequent by those artists who found themselves on the north side of the Canada/United States border in the late '60s, and occurred mainly in the frame of pedagogical institutions, where artists were both teaching and learning, but also for example by Americans migrating to Canada, among others. Even though one can't speak of a school or a clearly defined movement, there were explicit international exchanges and contacts between Los Angeles and San Francisco, and Vancouver and Victoria, forming a 'corridor of practice' that existed between from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s. The results of this channelled exchanges can be traced in Intermedia collective's mandate and work, and also continue later on, for example in works by Canadian artists Mowry Baden, Max Dean and Diana Burgoyne produced in the 1970s and early 1980s, that illustrate the influences of their travels to southern California. Exhibitions occur both in the USA and Canada, in the same frequency, raising the issue of the notion of a 'dualistic cultural citizenship'. Langill's research clearly shows that the link between artists living in southern California and the Pacific Northwest was much stronger than links between artists on an East/West axis in Canada, despite an intense nationalistic imperative at that time. Therefore Media Art Histories shouldn't be ethnically bound, as they wouldn't reflect the reality of early electronic new media art practices.

In the closing presentation, *A turning point in Japanese Avant-Garde Art: 1964-1970*, Machiko Kusahara referred to key issues which were also addressed in all previous three presentations, such as the notion of avant-garde, the relationship between media art and its local/national context, and the extend to which international exchanges influenced local scenes. Only but, by focusing on the interplay between media art and society, culture and politics during a critical period (1964-1970) of Japanese post-war history, she was the only one to address directly the sensitive and complex, yet crucial issue of how important it is to analyze the interactions between art, artists and their environment, in order to understand the way media

art developed.

Using examples from the Japanese art scene such as GUTAI artist Atsuko Tanaka's or Akira Kanayama's works, Kusahara illustrated that although it was common for avant-garde artistic practices in Japan to use (media) technology, once western gaze became dominant in the art scene they either stopped, either gradually turned to representational/painting practices. Kusahara points out 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympic Games, as a turning point for the vitality of the avant-garde scene. Around the same time, the announcement of the Osaka EXPO '70 triggered a great discourse among artists and architects experimenting with media technologies, on whether to accept the EXPO's invitation to design major pavilions or not. Since the political and commercial motives behind the EXPO '70 were harshly criticised (the EXPO was considered to be drawing public attention away from the renewal of US-Japan Security Treaty, also taking place in 1970) some artists rejected the invitation and joined either Fluxus in New York or the anti-EXPO movement, while others responded to the festival's call. Due to the successful results of the collaboration system between artists and the industry that was introduced then, this model has dominated ever since, influencing the development of media art itself. Kusahara traces the emergence of characteristic elements of Japanese media art, such as playfulness, positive attitude towards technology, and friendly relationship to the industry, in the period from 1964 and 1970, and argues that this period represents a shift of the avant-garde movement from radicalism to pragmatism.