



ESPACES NÉOMÉDIATIQUES

Advocating the Future: Media Art at the Festivals

Although festivals have played a key role in the development of media art, their influence in the definition of different creative practices and of the field itself seems to be overlooked. The history of media art is intricately connected to that of festivals and events which have defined its forms of presentation and discussion. As the medium has evolved in the last twenty to thirty years, so have these events progressed towards different levels of maturity, and in some cases, decadence. It is therefore an appropriate moment to examine how festivals shape themselves while also shaping our understanding of media art.

This is the Future

A media art festival works in a similar way to any other large artistic event, be it an art fair or biennial, in the sense that it must

achieve a distinctive identity and a reputation for being 'the place to be' for professionals and aficionados in the field. Still, while contemporary art fairs and biennials are entitled to presenting the latest trends in art, that is, the *present* of art, media art festivals typically engage in the riskier task of foreseeing the *future* of art and society in the wake of the innovations brought by emerging technologies. Thus their discourse has tended to incorporate different forms of prognostication in which neologisms and the words 'new' and 'future' have become almost mandatory: some festivals have adopted futuristic names such as *Futuresonic* or *Art Futura*, others have given their symposia promising titles such as *Takeover. Who is Doing the Art of Tomorrow* (Ars Electronica 2001). And when, in 1996, the Ars Electronica Center opened in Linz, it was christened 'the museum of the future.' The enthusiastic reception of every new technological development that seemed



to (and in some cases did) break new ground in the scientific, economic, social or artistic fields, was fueled during the 1990s by the fast-paced 'digital revolution' that in a few years changed the way we used computers and communicated with the rest of the world. This decade saw the emergence of many 'new' media festivals, along with those events that had previously focused on video art and were now incorporating computer-based art. The future remained a key concept in these events, and although the dot-com bubble crash (as well as the 9/11 attacks) eroded the initial utopianism, the start of a new millennium increased the motivation to keep discussing about the future. All in all, already in 2004, as Ars Electronica (the most veteran new media festival) was celebrating its 25th anniversary, predicting the future had become less popular and much more sober. Answering the question of how will the future be in the next 25 years, Derrick de Kerckhove stated that it was very difficult to predict what will happen in the next five years: "Even with the five years' range, trend analysts tend to fall short, generally by putting these short-term advances still too far away."¹ Some years later, Transmediale has addressed

this subject under the title *Futury Now!* (Transmediale 2010) by adopting a much more critical position: "What we used to think of being the future suddenly became passé! [...] the conditions for another form of future needed to be laid out."² The future thus remains a main subject, but the task of the festivals will not be limited to predicting what will be, but also to label and define what is being created now.

Defining Terms

Terminology is a particularly unstable aspect of new media festivals. As temporary events that attempt to articulate a comprehensive overview of the most recent trends in art and technology and furthermore predict its future developments, festivals tend to adopt new terms in order to keep up with the developments in the field. Notably many festivals at the end of the 1980s moved from video art to new media, the most renowned example being that of the VideoFest in Berlin, which in 1997 became Transmedia and finally Transmediale in 1998. By establishing categories, new media festivals have strongly contributed to define

The new Ars Electronica Center by the Danube, Linz, 2009. Photo: Pau Woelder.

Relational Architecture: Body Movies, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2002. Photo: Pau Woellder.



the labels currently applied to media art projects and also to the popularity of certain forms of artistic creation. Since the birth of its *Prix* in 1987, the Ars Electronica team has been brought to incorporate new categories and eliminate older ones in order to respond to the changing trends in new media: while initially setting up very specific categories, the *Prix* has evolved into more imprecise terms such as 'Hybrid Art' or 'Digital Communities.' Remarkably these two categories have substituted those devoted to interactive art and net art (Net Vision and Net Excellence), which had been popular during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. On the one hand, these changes in nomenclature and the way in which they were applied have not been without controversy. For instance, the disappearance of the 'Interactive Art' category followed a discussion over one of the awarded artworks, Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post* (2002–2004), which, according to Erkki Huhtamo, could not be consi-

dered 'interactive'.³ On the other hand, festivals have appropriated certain forms of media art by establishing categories for it, as is the case of the 'Software Art' category in the Transmediale Festival in 2001⁴. Recently, the trend has been to either dismiss categories or make them flexible, for as Piotr Krajweski states: "The more rigid the categories, the more it seems that the most important things always take place in cracks between them."⁵

The Festival as Catalyst

In 2004, Gerfried Stocker, one of the artistic directors of Ars Electronica, stated that the role of the festival had changed over the years: "It is now more or less impossible to present new things or to be aware of all the media art production in the world. So, the festival becomes more an intermediary, a catalyst. It is about bringing in at the same time, and the same place many interesting things and trying to generate a critical mass of interesting and

Corpora in Sigh/le, doubleNegatives Architecture, Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2009. Photo: Pau Woellder.

