



PETER WEIBEL

DIRECTOR OF ZENTRUM FÜR KUNST
UND MEDIEN TECHNOLOGIE

Peter Weibel is an artist, curator and media theorist. He started by exploring the art of performance before discovering the creative potential of media and technologies. In addition, whilst running ZKM in Karlsruhe, he was the artistic director of digital art events and the new media art curator.

Everyone knows your work as a theorist and curator, but it is first and foremost as an artist that you are active in the art world. I remember your installation "Possible" (1967), and its surprise effect! Wouldn't illusion, like surprise, be recurring concepts in media arts?

Human beings are driven by illusions. You can call it desire, drive, whatever, the fact is that illusion is the term for a space of possibility. You know something doesn't exist, but you can make it possible. I would never say this in the platonic or classical, ontological sense, which distinguishes between reality and possibility. I say the possible is inscribed in the real (...).

Wittgenstein said, the world is what exists. Not true. The world is much more, it's what does not exist. The room of possibility is much greater than the room of what exists. What exists is more than we can think. What we can formalize in language is less than what we can think. Normally people think you can describe something completely. Actually we can think much more than what we can describe with language. But what exists in nature is much more than what we can think. Only slowly are we approaching it. So in that sense, the world is a continuum of the possible, which is not closed. The purest impression of this idea was science. Then for a long time it was art.

Today it is not the same anymore, but for a long time, art was similar to science (...). Surprise and innovation are always part of science, also of art, as long as it follows the same idea as science. These days art is something different...

It started with postmodernism, because with postmodernism citation became equal to innovation. It was not necessary like in modern art to be innovative. So postmodernism killed innovation, killed science, etc. I think that good art is always for surprise. This is what I try to do with my artwork (...). I want to surprise technically and conceptually, to open a new door, a new space, a new possibility.

You have been the Artistic Director of "Ars Electronica", the first festival dedicated to emerging art practices. Isn't the growing success of such events, particularly in Europe, stressing the failure of museums to integrate such practices?

The greatest problem is the market. It's my observation that the greatest, most famous media artists – like Bill Viola, Nam June Paik – are never at art auctions (...). The auction market is only for sculpture and paintings and graphics. Even when you have a famous name like Bruce Nauman, who does video installations and sculptures, his sculptures are in auctions, but not his video works. Acceptance of media art came through festivals and biennials (...). So indeed, museums act as a part of the market and exclude still media art. Biennales' triumph is the inevitable rise of media art. Most museums are still afraid of media, they follow the logic of the market, they always show the same artists, which are market artists (...).

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Therefore we need more and more biennials and festivals. It's the only platform where media art can be shown, unfortunately.

You are one of those who have theorized about virtuality or interactivity. Nevertheless did you not give the best definition of interactivity when you presented, in 2008, "Fiat Lux" (1967) by Yaacov Agam, at the entrance of the Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville?

It's the perfect piece to explain what is interactivity: a physical relation between the spectator and the artwork. That means the spectator is on the level of the artist. Already in Op Art and Kinetic Art the spectator had to move to set the artwork in motion or into existence. But with electricity interactivity became evident.

Fiat Lux is precisely the moment of transition because artificial light has a source electricity. Electronic arts still has the word "electricity" in it. The smallest particle of electricity is the electron.

The difference between media art and film, photography, is interactivity. All these old media can't be interactive. The core of electronic art is interactivity. Today we have all these network platforms, all these social revolutions which are supported by social media. Social media are the effect of interactivity of electronic media (...).

The recent exhibition "Digital Art Works", at ZKM, revolved around the issues linked to the preservation of digital works. Is it important to preserve works that we might as well regard as ephemeral by documenting them with the appropriate media as for "in situ" installation or performance art?

It's a big problem to conserve these artworks, which are ephemeral, to conserve them to have a duration. It's a very important project that we're doing at ZKM.



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We have our own laboratories, and many artists know this and come to ask us for help. I think this is the most crucial: how do you conserve video works, because they use old monitors, or in the works of Dan Flavin, he uses fluorescent lights (...). in video have cathode ray tubes. So I buy them now, about 400 old monitors (...). I seriously want to become the Louvre of media art in the next 500 years, that means to have the possibility to show historical works also under historical conditions.

Isn't new media art offering the opportunity to revisit art history through reactivated practices?

Indeed, media art changed the view of art and reactivated old practices. A lot of modern art, like Pop art and kinetic art, was rediscovered through the media experience. It goes back to romantic painting, landscape painting, and even back to the perspective painting of the Renaissance.

Matisse made jokes: if somebody paints a perspective, it's like making a hole in the wall. If somebody painted a perspective, everybody wanted a flat surface to be modern. Today we have computers with all these variables so that you can make wonderful objects in space that rotate of any angle. So we rediscovered perspective (...). Bill Viola's recreation of classical paintings opened the eyes of many people to look closer than ever at artists' worlds, to look at it in a different way. The greatest triumph of media art is not only that it exists, but precisely the influence that media have on painting and sculpture. Today, many sculptures, many works of land art or performance art, used photography and video as their medium. So we can say that media have become the only material of sculpture and performances. So the triumph of media is the effects it has on art forms prior to itself (...).

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In a society shaped by digital technologies, are the artists who use the said technologies not better equipped to provide us with readings or interpretations of the world?

This is precisely my axiom. It started with Seurat, the master, the most scientific of the impressionists. He said: I want to give a picture of my time with the means of my time. When our world is created by electronic media, the artists are best suited and adapted to give a picture of the contemporary world using the means by which the contemporary world is constructed. So in 100 years, when people want to know how it was in the 20th century, or in 200 years how it was in the 21st century, the best testimonials will be media art – be it video installations, be it computer installations, whatever. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Peter Weibel
< www.peter-weibel.at >
ZKM
< www.zkm.de >



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