



20
DIGITAL YEARS
PLUS

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A DISCONCERTING TREATISE ON THE ESSENCE OF NET CULTURE

Dr. Hans Diebner

What prompts a physicist to be concerned with the origin and essence of media culture and net culture? Putting this biographic question right at the start of this condensed matter in hand but ultimately very long story points straight to its dominant self-referentiality. Art, more or less, has always been self-referential. In essence, the same is true for net culture and likewise for systems theory and cybernetics, which is why the discourse on net culture is of particular interest for a physicist who deals with systems theory.

Starting point of my critique is the obvious fact that cybernetic thinking more and more dominates society including cultural activities. As a consequence of this cybernetization of society and particularly the arts, it starts to become a serious general social problem. This occurrence is, for better or for worse, accompanied by the convergence of art and life or, more general, an ontological indifference of "art and x" (x as placeholder for science, economics, life, technology, and so forth). I am inclined to diagnose a social dysfunction with paranoid and conspiratorial characteristics as a result. The basically well-intentioned holistic systemic thinking, namely that everything interacts with everything, is recently brought to excess. I see net art as an indicator for this undesirable development because net art is the most extreme version of pulling the previously non-propositional arts into the hegemony of propositional logic and the radicalization of Hegel's idealism called radical constructivism. Art historians feel compelled to no longer refer to art at all with respect to media art and net art. Media art, particularly net art, manifests itself as a media theoretical

subject. Artists turned into activists, hacktivists, and the like. This seems to be much more appealing for media theoreticians than art historians. Aesthetic considerations, is to be feared, falls by the wayside.

In this context, Station Rose (STR) play a particularly interesting role as one of the rare counter-examples. As cyber-artists STR are strikingly different in that they are, doubtlessly, artists (as contrast to activists) who use digital media and the cyberspace as media vehicle. Moreover, their work can justifiably been called pioneering in that their cyber-artistic achievements go back to the 1980s. However, traditional art history lags behind with adequate methods to include new-media-based art in the art history's canon. It is much more media theory that deals with media-based art. Unfortunately, media theory lags behind with aesthetic understanding. It can clearly been seen that works showing systemic characteristics are preferred at the expense of aesthetic qualities.

For constructing an hypothesis I draw on patterns that I think can be recognized when the characteristics of "the usual suspects" of net art are analyzed. Many of the overvalued systemic-based net artists take Marshall McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message" overly literal. In the following I want to show that it goes even deeper. The artists, the spectators, and most likely a large fraction of society, are themselves turned into media. A reification takes place. The subject becomes an object within the constructed reality. A total deprivation of being. Astonishingly, this seems to be hip and compelling.

The following quotation of the contemporary web activist Hans Bernhard may be dismissed as artistic provocation or plainly and simply as psychotic:

*"Hans Bernhard's neuronal networks are connected to the global network, and his mental illness — the bipolar affective disorder that in March 2002 sent him to a mental hospital — is the network's illness. The video called Psych(OS (2005) sums up that experience, in which those two levels — digital and real, bio&tech, nervous system and operative system — merge. This nervous system, infected by the hi-tech, needs a treatment, and the hi-tech society prescribes its remedies, bio-chemical 'agents' which control the internal information flow. [...] The Psych(OS Generator (2006) is the literal application of this kind of control: a piece of software that asks the user about the symptoms of her disease and provides her with a remedy, in the form of a 'forged original' medical prescription."*¹

It is my hypothesis that the true cause of such a "systemic disease" lies in a lapse of being (Seinsverfehlung), in other words, it is a "dialectic endless loop" as a result of an extreme (system theoretical) form of (Hegelian) idealism often called radical constructivism.

The above quoted example is a rather arbitrary one and definitely not intended to denounce particular net activists. It is no secret that a large fraction of contemporary web art is based on fake. A constructed war against a constructed social reality leading to new suspicion. The "system" acts and is antagonized at the same time in a game of cat and mouse. At a first glance, the net activists seem to fight a kind of gang war. Net art sites have been hacked by other hacktivists and the hacking itself declared as art. And this is not even the highest level in media hacking. The absurdity seems to have no limit. Hans Bernhard's "bipolar affective disorder" is instrumentalized as part of the next level in media hacking.

The observation that "conspiracy" has recently become a buzz word proves that it is more than just an irrelevant artistic side scene. The internet seems to be a preferred or a natural habitat for constructivists. It is my persuasion, to cut it short, that cyberspace is a phenomenon where the metaphor by and large becomes the essence. There has been a general tendency all along to show the blurring of essence and metaphor in scientific methodology and even more in technology, particularly in all technological media. Cyberspace seems to be most effective in this respect, though. Once the pretended "world on a wire" or "matrix" becomes conviction it enters a self-referential and obviously dominant phase. In the following I want to supply arguments and evidence. However, part of my considerations remain hypothetical and some conclusions are speculative.

The fact that substantially working net-art pioneers like STR have been ignored is most likely not a simple coincidence but rather an outcome of the "Tom-and-Jerry-society". The ignorance is also closely related to the "death of art history", as has recently been augured.² It is true that traditional art history doesn't have proper methods to deal with media art. STR produced and produce transient phenomena between art history and media theory. But this is not the full story. Also Klangkunst (sound art), i. e. the blending of visuals and acoustics, is oftentimes deficiently discussed because of a lack of appropriate methods. And this holds for the work of STR, too, because they also deal with an alliance of all arts: acoustics, performance, and visuals. However, the crisis is deeper than the mere fact that art history lags miles behind with their methods. Art history is gradually replaced by media theory. And it is indeed not only art history that is about to be replaced, it is even art itself that becomes media theory as Hans Ulrich Reck concludes.³ Notwithstanding these massive crisis, it is my conviction that art history will not only survive but that it will also develop appropriate means to include media art into their discourse. I dare to anticipate the art historical recognition of STR anytime soon.

Coming back to the cybernetization of art. As a disciple of the eminent chaos researcher Otto E. Rössler, the eponym of the Rössler attractor, i. e. one of the icons of chaos research, I am actually supposed to be familiar with the renunciation from scientific objectivity. For Rössler is also the initiator of an observer dependent physics called endophysics.⁴ Endophysics has hitherto been largely apprehended as futile or even rubbish in the scientific community. Not so in the art community. At least since the 1992's "endo and nano" ars electronica, where Rössler's endophysics went public, interactive media art has been characterized as endo aesthetics, i. e., a kind of applied endophysics. It must be said, however, that the system theoretical and cybernetic way of thinking has been adopted in the art's world long before endophysics. Anyway, in spite of my background in systems theory and endophysics, my "throwness" in 1999 as physicist into the "art world" at the center for art and media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe caused an irritation. The perhaps particularly faithful interpretation of systems theory in the art world caused me to distance myself from systems theory to a considerable extent. It has ever since been an emotionally charged question to me of whether art and science can and should be bridged. My answer is almost axiomatic: It shouldn't!

It is assumed that the reader is aware of a large fraction of contemporary artist's affinity for system theoretical concepts. As a reminder, it may suffice here to refer to the ground breaking events like *9 evenings — Theatre & Engineering* (sound performances by Billy Klüver's "Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)"), *cybernetic serendipity* (1968, an exhibition by Jasja Reichardt on what she calls "cybernetic art"), *software* (1969/70, an exhibition by Jack Burnham on what he calls "systems art"). The influence of cybernetics and systems theory onto art, however, exceeded the threshold of awareness much earlier during the 1950s, particularly in literature and music. The Beat Generation and their extensive contacts to cyberneticists and (system-)psychologists (like Timothy

Leary) eventually opened into cyberpunk and other cybernetic-influenced genres. Currently, there is a noticeable revival of the "Beat" (cut-up, mash-up, emergence of meaning in random permutations of found footage, and so forth). Novels that address social design and conspiracy boom. John Brockman coined the notion of "third culture" to summarize the converging cultures into a cultural phenomenon, which is, for better or for worse, an amplification of post modernism and, therefore, certainly deserves this new notion. I am inclined to characterize "third culture" as ideologization of a previously well intentioned "systems thinking".

Some notes on the history of systems theory are advisable, although I try to cut the long story short. An important key figure certainly was the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. By the end of the 19th century he suggested to differentiate the epistemic process into "understanding" and "explanation". He attributed the latter to (natural) sciences with its methods. Understanding, in contrast, he attributed to what he and the German academic community henceforth called "Geisteswissenschaft", which is probably not fully apprehended by the English expression "humanities". Understanding, in his conception, is achieved through an hermeneutic process. The hermeneutic circle is not a method in a strict sense. In a nutshell, the hermeneutic circle stands for the process of understanding the part through a prior understanding of the whole and a subsequent improvement of the understanding of the whole and so forth. The physical involvement of the human being thereby plays a prominent role. It is remarkable that, in this context, Dilthey frequently used the notion of "system" to refer to the holistic character of hermeneutics. Furthermore, he assumed primacy of "Geisteswissenschaft" for each scientific endeavours are intellectual endeavors. Early systems theoretical writings adopted Dilthey's conception to a large extent. A "system" is not an "existential" but rather a universal "constructed category". Early systems theoreticians, therefore, regarded systems theory as philosophical engineering.

Another important figure of Continental philosophy certainly is Martin Heidegger. He also build on Dilthey's work. Heidegger's fundamental ontology is often summarized in the famous phrase "being-in-the-world". In his early work, he often referred to Dilthey and hermeneutics as a crucial holistic praxis for "thinking" (understanding being). The process of understanding cannot be (completely) reduced to a pure propositional logic. Rather, it contains performative elements. Heidegger's writings are usually regarded as extremely complex and difficult to understand. Nevertheless, Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" has ever since been cited as a crucial conception behind systems theory, too. Doubtlessly, there is a remarkable difference between Rössler's endophysics and Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Yet, with a large grain of salt, "being-in-the-world" constitutes a kind of endophysics *avant la lettre*. At least, it is understood in this way in the systems theoretical community. At this point, it is difficult to figure out why Heidegger, as a matter of fact, regarded systems theory and cybernetics downright as the worst enemy of "thinking". It takes a great deal of intense studies into fundamental ontology to understand this essential discrepancy. In short: the performative aspect of understanding is pulled toward the logical side by systems theory. In other words, even systems theory cannot avoid the general tendency of natural sciences to be positivistic.

Let me motivate the problem by a view remarks on second order cybernetics. Cybernetics treats objects as systems. And, as has been mentioned above, "system" is a universal constructed category. Everything can be described as system. The scientific disciplines are systems, too. Or take, for example, the "art system". Cybernetics is a subsystem that belongs to the system constituted by scientific disciplines. Therefore, cybernetics belongs to the subject area of cybernetics, which leads to second order cybernetics. Now not only the universal but also supra-theoretical character of systems theory

can clearly be seen. Cybernetics is the (pretended) union of physics and metaphysics (ontology).

Heidegger's fundamental ontology is based on the ontic-ontological difference. In his understanding physics and cybernetics and all the other scientific disciplines are ontic but not ontological. According to Heidegger, the question of being, or more correct, the question of the meaning of being, cannot be answered using scientific methods. Art, in Heidegger's conception, is a practice that at least can help densify understanding. His conception of art is ontological. Moreover, his conception of ontology is performative (has artistic aspects).⁵ Therefore, the incorporation of ontology into cybernetics' subject area means to make ontology ontic. Indeed, there exist attempts to even describe the "art system" within the synergetic⁶ framework⁷.

Timothy Leary, who collaborated with STR, criticized the buzz word "multi-media-interactive" in an illuminating fax to STR as of March 1991⁸. He noticed that the verb "to interact" is misleadingly used where "to react" appears to be the correct term: "Humans and machines 'react'. Only two or more humans can 'inter-act'. The point is that machines cannot perform as 'actors'." STR are acting using multi-media. And they interact with the aid of these media appliances with other humans. Although the majority of contemporary net activists claim that they do interactive work, they actually perform reactive and they make users to re-act. This is in line with my own analysis⁹ where I supplied evidence for reification (*Verdinglichung*) for a significant amount of works that are based on the misguided usage of "interactivity".

As a conclusion I want to ask again the question of why substantial works are ignored in favor of re-activistic reified work? The sick explanation by Hans Bernhard as quoted above gives the clue. The digital universe constitutes a *πάρμακον* (pharmakon). Already Plato and roughly 2 millenniums later Heidegger clearly pointed out that each cultural technique and technology in general constitutes

a poison that contains its own remedy. Scripture compensates a bad memory but at the time even impairs memory due to neglected practice. It is often claimed that only technology can supply a remedy for the damage done through technology. Previously well-intended systems thinking, as it unfortunately falls out, sees each occurrence as potentially suspect that has to be answered by an offensive that in turn increases suspect and so forth. It is now essential that cyberspace will again be populated with artists — not re-activists. Art history should urgently care about contemporary media art because otherwise the trend toward a "systemic disease" of the "art system" might become unstoppable. Why not start with appreciation due to Station Rose?

This seems to be a good point to take up the opening question. As a self-critical scientist who is interested in ontological problems a union with the arts seemed to be the thing to do. However, art as science or science as art or both at the same time, i. e. art=science: These are only different ways of confusing the proper with the improper (or the essence with the metaphor). Contrary to the rules, it was Goethe who obviously managed to harmonize art and science in his work. The last line of his famous poem "Ginkgo Biloba" reads: "Do my songs not make you feel—That I am both one and twain?" The historian of science Walter Saltzer writes in his essay¹⁸ on Goethe after quoting Goethe's poem "Ginkgo Biloba" out of the West-Eastern Divan, i. e., Goethe's book of the reconciliation of cultures:

"The divided, but symmetrically unified Ginkgo leaf—a splendid symbol for the artist and scientist Goethe. Art and science in one! Does that go together, after all? Or perhaps it doesn't in the end? Should the last line, therefore, not better read, 'that I am divided and only half'."

And with reference to the historical precedence Lucretius, he further writes:

"The ideal of the [Freudian] theory would then be the suicide due to inner conflict, demonstrated through the pretended vita of the nature-inspired poet and passionate advocate of the atomic world view at the same time, Titus Lucretius Carus. Of course, Lucretius' suicide is a trendy invention only, and even the most intimate expert does not know anything about a suicidal end of Goethe."

Does there exist a bridge between art and science? Not so when taking the ontological stance. Heidegger says, "...there exists no bridge, only the jump." Provided that the built-in corrective in science via art is sincere what is the recipe for bearing up against the inner conflict? An awkward side effect of the art&science trend is the conspicuous dilution of both art and science. Instead of a sincere discourse almost only blatant hypes survive, which is in line with current viral marketing strategies. Contents are pushed totally into the background. What counts is how the system is best controlled and utilized. The affair between art and science reached a tipping point. The certain indefinable something that emerged from the ontological indifference between art and science is often called "third culture". However, a tipping point would not be a tipping point, if there would not exist an opposite side, a "biotope" of performativity, non-propositional logics, and a touch of mysticism.

It is my observation that the emerged dilemma between art and science has a clear trend towards an aporia. For the time being it is much more a problem of art and less of science but this will probably change soon. I am well aware that art has several times pronounced dead. Yet, the aporia has a new quality, it seems. It was the avant-garde movement in art that contributed to its own ruin. Definitely not as a moral fault. The preceding excursion into my own experience was thought as evidence for the reverse.

To conclude, I see parallels to the story of Station Rose. As avant-garde artists they also faced the tipping point. Studying their early works and

performances as well as their current activities one clearly sees that they settled in the performative biotope. Now is the time for art history to account for this important aspect of contemporary art and not to leave the field completely to the systemic infection. As an allusion to a well-known hacktivist group with systemic fitness and adaptiveness I should like to speak of an overturn of the steamer after a (digital) hijack. It is, by the way, the same group that abuses the message of Timothy Leary to mock an "eternal mission". Of course, it is an extremely interesting social phenomenon worth being analyzed. However, not on the expense of aesthetics and performativity. Let me finally ask a provocative question. Is the one to be blamed who declares her plagiarism of the inventors of mash-up as mash-up or the inventors?

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7. Wolfgang Tschacher and Martin Tröndle: *Die Funktionslogik des Kunstsystems – Vorbild für betriebliche Organisation?* In: Timo Meynhardt and Ewald J. Brunner (Eds.): *Selbstorganisation managen. Beiträge zur Synergetik der Organisation*. Waxmann, Münster, 2005, pp. 135–152.
8. Station Rose: *1st Decode*. edition selene, Wien, 1998, p. 63.
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30, 31, 37, 38, 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 54, 56, 57, 64,

65, 68, 69, 70, 71, 76, 77, 81, 82, 92, 95, 96, 99, 107, 108,

112, 114, 117, 123, 124, 127, 128, 129, 130, 146, 148, 156,

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