

BASICS

Transmediale 05

International Media Art Festival, Berlin

From February 4th to 8th 2005

“Copyright Developments Turn Us All Into Thieves”

The atmosphere of Transmediale 2005 was dominated by the presence of Steve Kurtz, member of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE's work has always been critical of the politics that touch on the basics of our existence: our food, our sex, our control over communication and knowledge. He was the first artist that has been actively prosecuted under the anti-terrorist laws in the United States. Kurtz and CAE collaborator, Claire Pentecost, presented his case at a special session before the conference, leaving the audience stunned with disbelief. It made one realize how we are really all submitted to war politics after the Twin Towers attack, even if we can still sip our café latte at the conference café. With this case, putting the finger on a very sore spot, it was hard not to see all other presentations in the light of cultural and/or political relevance and effectiveness. When talking 'basics of media art', the first panel discussion unfortunately got stuck in lamenting the lack of interest for media art from the art world. An attempt at boosting media art's self-esteem by saying "if *they* don't get it, it's *their* loss", in the words of 'fifth' panelist and Transmediale director, Andreas Broeckman, didn't help. The most interesting talk in this panel was by Gunalan Nadarajan, from the LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts in Singapore, who also seems to have been responsible for the abolishment of categories in the Transmediale award. He made a strong point for reflecting on media art from a deep historical perspective, suggesting a comparison with the ancient Greek science of Hero or Philo. Christiane Paul, curator at the Whitney Museum, New York, asked for caution when using the term 'media art', but then (maybe understandably) lost herself in negative descriptions of encounters with 'fine art' colleagues. Sally Jane Norman of the Culture Lab in Newcastle probably gave the most contradictive talk, by first quoting the composer Erik Satie saying: "Experience is a form of paralysis", and then embarking on a lecture on how questioning the use of the term 'media art' undermined the work of those that came earlier. She even suggested that a critical reflection of terminology is redundant and arrogant in the light of earlier discourses. No need to say this seemed very inappropriate and paralyzing. The Re-Thinking Media Art History panel was better, but not half as interesting as its title would suggest. One major reason for this was that the panel was divided in two sections. This was a pity, because before the break, the presentations of Woody Vasulka and Siegfried Zielinski opened up many interesting issues, yet the energy had disappeared at the final discussion. Vasulka spoke of early video art being more or less condemned to have a dead end, as if it embodied an ideology. The picture he drew was that of a closed circuit of artists, that did not connect to art at large, and who mocked their own possible future by saying that one day they would be called 'the tribe that worshipped electricity.' Zielinski warned against technological developments in the scientific and historical approach of media art, a materialistic approach to solving cultural issues, which simplify and falsify histories. Sometimes "progressive is regressive."

The panels 'Basics of Life' and 'Basics of Security' were the strongest and apparently central themes of the conference. The first was very lively, because of the presence of artists Steve Kurtz and Claire Pentecost, which was topped by the choice of the third speaker, philosopher Henk Oosterling. He constantly provoked Kurtz and Pentecost to explain their motivations and choices, which evoked the only spicy discussion in the entire conference. A few quotes from the panel: "artists became the cheerleaders of the sciences in the past few decades" (Kurtz); "we either help change the developments [in copyright and biotech], or we will all be turned into thieves" (Pentecost); "the hypocritical position is the best form of resistance [to recompose the world as it exists today]" (Oosterling). In his eyes, there is no productive outsider position anymore. The panel made clear that biotech and copyright issues are going to be the most important issues of the next decades. Basics of Security started off with a lecture by Konrad Becker that was a bit like a video being played fast forward. Even if this made some of his message being lost, it provided an alert audience for the next two speakers: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and McKenzie Wark. The one problem with this panel was however that the theme of 'Basics of Security' was taken so literally that the panel did not really connect well to the outcome or practice of security politics, as was outlined in for instance the Steve Kurtz/CAE presentations. This seemed another opportunity missed by the conference. Unfortunately, I had no time to stay for more than four days, through which I missed the Media Art Education panel on Tuesday. Hopefully, media art education is more up to speed than the theoretical panels around media art at Transmediale would suggest. Even if the conference was not entirely living up to its potential, it did show Transmediale's strongest point: reflecting current issues. They show the deep and often obscured connection between technological, cultural and political developments. For artists to work in this context, that new definition of 'media art' everybody seemed to wish for, might be handy after all. Josephine Bosma

