<div align="center">

What is the point of art in the media age?
Dieter Daniels

</div>

A guided tour of "Art as Trans-mission"[1]

Are media artists merely parasites of the developments of industrial technology? Or has art with media and through media inspired and indeed anticipated modern-day technical developments? In order to ponder such questions we must define the time horizon more broadly than is usually the case with media art. The discussion usually deals with an overview of the forty years since video and computer became available – or we start by looking back at film, kinetics and sound art since the 1920s. But a debate on the principles of the interplay between art and media can only begin with the invention of the key media technologies.

The two primal media underlying our modern diversity of radio, television and the Internet are telegraphy and photography. The marriage of electrical signal transmission and technical image gave rise to all subsequent developments. Two artists went down in history as the inventors of these two primal media: as of 1835, S. F. B. Morse developed electrical telegraphy, while J. L. M. Daguerre presented photography for the first time in 1839. These media inventions may be seen as a continuation of their artistic ideas with different means. Morse and Daguerre are typical cases of a crisis of artists' self-confidence on the threshold of the modern age in the first half of the 19th century. This crisis is triggered, among other things, by the technological progress that causes art to appear no longer to be the culmination of human creation. Morse and Daguerre failed to achieve their great personal ambitions in the realm of art. However, by radically switching professions, they ultimately attained immortal fame as inventors instead of artists. They represent the conflict of art with emerging media technology in the first half of the 19th century as much as they are symptomatic of the new genius status of the inventor as a rival to the artist. At the same time, their individual biographies reveal that both their art and their media inventions are founded on very similar motives. That is to say, they are the first examples of the process of substituting art with media that has persisted to this day – for instance when net artist Vuk Cosic says in an interview, "Art was only a substitute for the Internet."[2]

This process of substitution found its counterpart as of the end of the 19th century in the anticipation of technological developments by modernist artists. For the most part, this was not anticipation of actual technologies but rather of potentials for development, of the impacts and applications of media technologies. For example, Villiers' science-fiction novel about "Tomorrow's Eve" picks up on Edison's invention of the phonograph, albeit carrying the concept forward into modern debates on artificial intelligence and cyborgs. As of the start of the 20th century, such anticipations already comprise the concept of art involving media. For example, Guilliaume Apollinaire proposed the idea of wireless sound broadcast in 1914, whereas radio was not invented until almost a decade later.

---

[1] Dieter Daniels, "Kunst als Sendung. Von der Telegrafie zum Internet", Munich 2002. Cf. www.medienkunstnetz.de/daniels. On this paper, compare the e-mail dialogue between Tilman Baumgärtel and Dieter Daniels, Innovative Amateure an den Schnittstellen von Kunst und Medien, Telepolis 19.01.2003, http://www.telepolis.de/deutsch/inhalt/sa/13975/1.html.
[2] Cf. the "First main thesis", p. 216.

Hence, a presentation of previously ignored interfaces between art and media must begin far earlier than any media art. Various scenarios for such encounters prove suitable for this purpose: museum / telegraphy as two social utopias in the context of the French Revolution; telegraphy / photography as the substitution of art at the personalised level (Morse / Daguerre, as mentioned above); phonograph / novel as the rivalry of technology / poetry for imagination with Edison and Villiers; television as apparatus / utopia with Nipkow / Robida, etc.

It evolves that the motives underlying the technological inventions and imaginations are as generally societal and profoundly personal and equally para-religious as those that we expect and hope to find in art. "What God hath wrought!" is the Bible passage that Morse used to kick off his first telegraph line. And in the world's first text on photography, the art critic Jules Janin writes, "There is a beautiful passage in the Bible that says, 'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.' Now we can command the towers of Notre-Dame, 'Become images!' And the towers shall obey."

Humanities in this field of the interference of art and media is not yet at a stage where it can fall back on a representative overview and propose a universally applicable theory. It must first collect the facts on the basis of samples and case studies so as to be able to outline theoretical models upon this basis.[3] Both in terms of an analysis of the facts and with regard to the theoretical consequences it is a matter of defending the status of art against a one-sided technological determinism and of giving the potency of the aesthetic (in and outside of art) its rightful position once again.

In the 19th century, these one-off symptomatic cases do not hail from the field of visual arts but also – in the form of Baudelaire, Villiers, Verne, etc. – from the world of literature. At the dawn of the 20th century, the foundations began to broaden into a transdisciplinary concept of art, a concept that ranges from the poetry of futurism to the colour composition of Delaunay. Such an intimate interplay with the underlying conditions of media technology can presumably be found in practically all areas of culture production today. A concept of art and technology oriented to a particular canon always clings to individuals and names. Hence, it remains blind to overarching developments, although it is these alone that are efficacious in "real" life. This is true above all when you consider those forms of media that are no longer fronted by an inventor's name. In their current media form, radio and the Internet have been created by many anonymous, unknown individuals. As a critical mass, it is radio hams, hackers and nerds who precipitate radical change and a shift of paradigm in media developments. This may be demonstrated by comparing the boom of radio in the 1920s with the boom of the Net in the 1990s.

Hidden behind these questions as to methodology lies one of the crucial differences between art and media: the artist's fame always remains personalised, while the fame of the inventor becomes detached from him, becoming objectified in the apparatus and its effect, so much so indeed that we now speak of morse code without thinking of S. F. B. Morse.

Hence, there is no answer to the initial questions to be found in the history of media-based art forms but rather only by taking a new look at the history of media from the vantage point of art.

---

[3] Siegfried Zielinski's also takes this approach in his book "Archäologie der Medien" (Archaeology of the Media), that bears many similarities to "Kunst als Sendung" – even sharing practically the same date of publication.

This is demonstrated at the beginning of the 20th century in a parallel development of radio technology and film with poetry and painting. Here, the artistic avant-garde proves to be a guide, but a guide who does not walk the path himself. It anticipates forms of perception that are today part of everyday media life, for example the global simultaneity and omnipresence of wireless communcation (e.g. in Apollinaire, Cendrars, Delaunay). And yet art cannot perform the actual implementation in "real life", as we are experiencing it today – almost painfully – under the dictates of constant availability by mobile phone and email. Indeed, this media reality often runs counter to the artists' utopian, euphoric drafts.

On the other hand, the media development is stimulated by aesthetic, quasi-artistic motifs (as is the case, for example, with radio hams and the poets-cum-radio inventors De Forest and Tesla). But then it becomes detached from these individuals and motives, changing the world with an uncontrollable, brutal momentum of its own. It is then accelerated or halted by economic, political and social forces, but no longer by its initial aesthetic motives. We have observed this in the last decade with the boom and crash of the Internet hype, while our grandparents experienced something similar with the boom of radio up until the world-wide economic crisis of 1929.

With regard to the avant-garde of art, on the other hand, we may speak of "failure as an opportunity" (as Schlingensief might have said). Just as the New Economy steamrollered the pioneering phase of Net.Art, the unexpected success of radio pushed aside early attempts to establish the medium as an artistic medium for drama. And when Nam June Paik 1963 presented his "Participation TV", almost unnoticed by the mass media, at a private gallery in Wuppertal, who would have thought that related models would become a *leitmotif* of the media industry some thirty years later – even though the aim is no longer Paik's vision of creative potential but rather radical commercialisation? "Net Art would have been defeated by its very own qualities", writes Tilman Baumgärtel in "Die Zeit" of Nov. 28, 2002. Just like radio drama, experimental film and video art, it equally failed to change its media-based, economic and artistic context system as was originally laid out in its utopian project.

What remains? The beauty of unredeemed utopias that point out that things could be different to our banal everyday media life. So far, all utopias regarding an open, hierarchy-free media structure determined not only by the big "stations" – like the associated artistic drafts of the avant-garde – have always remained merely counter-models to prevailing conditions. In certain phases of upheaval when a new media model is beginning to take shape (e.g. "broadcasting" or the "World Wide Web"), artistic, technical and social ideas start to merge and it appears possible that everything may become different from now on. But when this development exceeds a "critical mass", it transcends insider groups and, at the same time, outgrows their ideals. A mass effect kicks in and the aforementioned inherent momentum of economy and politics begins to spread unstoppably. At this point it becomes clear that, in order to develop a new, different function of the media, these ideas and utopias would ultimately require a fundamentally different structure of society in order to be realised.

This is why these draft models remain largely unredeemed and only impact, if at all, as "minor media". Or, in the final words of Brecht's speech on "radio as an apparatus of communication", "Being unfeasible in this particular social system but feasible in another, these suggestions, which are really a natural consequence of technological development, serve to propagate and form a

DIFFERENT social system." The remaining signs of these unredeemed models are found, among other places, in media art to this day.[4]

But motives that were once in the domain of the arts have also found their way into everyday media practice. We may distinguish fundamentally between two kinds of individual autonomy vis-à-vis the media: the "media amateur" constructs his own technical base, working actively with the medium, whereas, as a mobile recipient, the "media flaneur" circumvents the prescribed contents by recombining the channels. The latter will always exist; indeed, as cable and satellite TV zapping demonstrates, the fun factor even increases with growing commercialisation. From radio hams to hackers, the active role of "media amateurs" in the construction of the medium has for the most part, however, been pushed to the fringe by the industrial mainstream or commercialised and tamed as a new market.

Therefore, the aim is by no means to repeat cultural criticism of the media. On the contrary, this fails to recognise the factor whereby media technology has always been "entertainment", "passion" and an "end in itself", from the "Daguerrotypomania" that broke out with the invention of photography in 1839 to filesharing and the demo scene. This leads us to the theory that "amateurs" have quit art and gone over to the media. Today, the enthusiasm with which the one-time art-lover emulated the great masters is plugged into perfecting his own media products, from the web site to holiday videos.

---

[4] Cf. the "Second main-thesis", p. 258.