

INTERVIEW TO PETER WEIBEL (ZKM / ARS ELECTRONICA)

We start the new series of interviews dedicated to the relationship between media, arts, technology and society with an interview to a special guest: Peter Weibel, multimedia artist, ZKM and Ars Electronica (1986-1995) director. The ZKM continues, under his supervision, to make really interesting exhibitions which inspect the relatively recent history of a series of artistic languages which have portrayed (and which still portray) the technological developments and their creative use by multimedia artists, keepers, more than anyone else, of the contemporaneity in the arts. Let's talk with him about a series of questions related to the so called new media arts.

1) Hi Peter, you're one of the lead protagonists of what would have become well known as "new media art". In this interview I'll try, with you, among the other topics discussed, to give the readers a suitable idea of what's behind this particular "macro art category". A lot of different interpretations are constantly written and said about what we could define as "new media art" and its key concepts. Could you tell us your definition so we can start our discussion from a starting point?

Media are a technical term between machines and system. Usually we divide between media and new media. Photography, radio, and film are classical media. Video, television, computer are called new media. Today we divide between analog and digital media, between visual and social media. We have to discern between emitter and receiver, between producer and distributor, between storage and communication. A media system consists of an information, a message, which is recorded on a technical carrier medium, for example a voice on a magnetic tape, music on a record, writing as ink on paper. In old media the message is encoded in the carrier in a way that you cannot change it, and that you cannot lift it from the carrier medium. When you lift the paint from the canvas or you change the paint on the canvas then you destroy the original painting. The same is valid for the record. In all these cases the information is stored analog, that is mechanic, magnetic or chemical. In digital storage you can separate the information from the carrier medium, you can change the information without destruction. The information is stored electronically; therefore it is a set of variables. If a system consists of variables then its ontological status is called virtual. If a system is virtual it can show lifelike behavior and therefore we call it viable.

An analogue photo apparatus is a machine, where the information is stored chemically, a digital photo apparatus has stored its information digitally. Therefore you can change its information with a paintbrush computer program on the computer screen. In this case we have a system consisting of two machines and a software.

A TV-system consists of an emitter (sender), a distribution channel (wavelength), and a receiver. Information is produced, distributed or communicated and received. With Internet everybody can be a producer of information, distribute it everywhere, and everybody can receive any message. With the advent of electromagnetic waves at the end of 19th century, the message was separated from the messenger. Signs and signals could travel alone without a body of a carrier.

The painter has only used his hand and his eyes, natural tools, given to men by evolution. These artists imposed on themselves a severe restriction and inhibition: only to work with your natural organs on the surface of things. Science used machines from microscope to telescope, from x-rays to computer tomography, to dig

underneath the surface, underneath the appearance of things in order to expand the horizon of the visible. Science starts, where perception ends – this is why art ended to be part of the modern world. The discovery of primitive art disguised as the origin of modernism is just a camouflage to hide this rejection to expand our natural organs with the help of apparatuses into new horizons of visions. Only media artists followed the scientists and shared the same man-made artificial technical tools. Therefore media artists are contributors to the contemporary world and therefore the art critics hate media artists, as do art museums, the art market, and finally the painters as well.

2) As an artist who has lived and evolved its way of making art through the media and the computer development, how could you define the role of a new media artist? What are his relationships with the media and what's his role into the creative process? Do he need to have a particular background in technology and programming?

A new media artist has realized that writing is the primary medium. It is a medium of absence, because it actualizes what is gone, what happened in the past, and it brings closer what is far away in space and time. Technology just continues the labor of writing. Since thousands of years writing was a dominant medium, it is difficult for most people to accept that we have now a new technology of absence available. Since hundreds of years painting was the dominant medium of image production, it is difficult for most people to accept that we have now a new technology of image production available. The new media combine both old media text and visuals and they are also performative. As a result new media are an enormous challenge for the established art system. In addition classical art was built on the logic of production and on the idea of monopoly. One artist produces one piece, a unique piece, an original piece. With the technology of printing we started the logic of distribution. Today many people can be artists and produce many pieces for many people. This change from production to distribution is accepted in cinema and music but not yet in the visual arts. The creative process has changed because it is now a dialogue with machines, systems, and media. Even when you profit from aberrations in the dialogue, from mistakes that you or the machine make, the goal is that you master the technology. Therefore the media artist has to be an erudite artist. You need competence and skills.

3) What's the interaction role on this type of artworks and what's the concept of interaction about? What's the main goal as an artist?

By the very technical nature of the carrier medium the function not only of the artwork has changed. In the beginning a painting was stuck on a wall, be it a fresco or a cave painting. With the advent of the easel painting the painting suddenly was movable and transportable. You could hang it on any wall. Today with mobile media the image can be carried by you anywhere and you can see it any time. The idea of the image was wandering from guest medium to guest medium, from easel painting to computer screen, during centuries. But with every new carrier medium the concept of image has changed. This is what people don't understand. With each new technical carrier medium the idea of the image offers new possibilities. A painting could not be changed physically by the spectator. It even should not be changed by the act of seeing, because this would have meant an act of destruction. With the technical image just the opposite is the case: The act of seeing becomes an act of physical construction. The observer can interact physically with the image, be it by sensors, be it by his body motion, be it by pressing buttons, etc. When the observer interacts with the artwork as a consequence the role of the artist changes. The observer becomes co-creator of the artwork. Before the advent of photography there was only a class of experts that could make an image, the so called painters, and there was only the class of

nobility that could pay for a painting. With the advent of photography suddenly everybody could make an image with the help of the machine and everybody could pay for an image of himself. The noble class has lost its privilege and the painters have lost their monopoly of image production. The masses could produce photographic images and the masses could buy these images. With the advent of interactive and participatory technologies the artist has lost its monopoly of creativity. This is why we speak of creative industries, because today everybody can be creative, can be an artist. Joseph Beuys said: »Everyone is an artist«, Marcel Duchamp stated in 1957 in his famous lecture on The Creative Act »All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator [...] adds his contribution to the creative act.« Interactivity is a new concept of the image offered by the new technology and is therefore irreversible. You don't invent a car, so that you may move slower than you walk. You invent the car to be faster than by feet. We did not invent the technical image to keep the same characteristics and qualities like painting. We invented the technical image to be different and to be richer in options than painting.

4) How the new media artist thinks the society in which he live, the technological developments and the art itself? What aspect, if there's one, have a leading role above the others in new media artworks creation? What's the starting point?

In contemporary media practice we can see two mainstreams: 1. Exploring intrinsic qualities of media, so called media specificity. This type of media artists wants to find out, what is specific for the print medium, for film, for video, for the digital media, etc. He wants to find out, what is it, what this medium can achieve alone. With his knowledge he creates media works, which are unique in the aesthetics. 2. Exploring the qualities of other media. This type of media artists follows Hollywood, because he imitates qualities of prior media. Hollywood film imitates the narrative model of 19th century theater plays and novels. Media artists of the second kind follow the path of theater, opera, film, etc. Therefore it is no wonder that artists like Steve McQueen or Sam Taylor-Wood finally end up making Hollywood movies. The market, private collectors, and the museum like type No. 2. I prefer type No. 1. The artist type No. 1 has achieved the wonder that the intrinsic qualities of his medium can become universal – for example that the out of focus photography is imitated by the painter Gerhard Richter. Digital effects are imitated by painters, filmmakers, photographers, sound artists, etc. The triumph of the new media consists of two parts: First that they create their own singular never before experienced art works. Second that they become a universal model and influence prior older media.

5) There's a slice of people, especially in countries like ours (Italy), who find that art is becoming more and more technological (true) and that it's missing its "artistry" (false), if we think at the prenew media art way of thinking and doing artworks. How can the director and the curator deal with this problem and try to generate a new, "updated", postmodern way of thinking?

This slice of people is technical analphabets and illiterates. When this kind of people articulates this kind of media critique, I tell them: Yes, if you want to do it, you can do it. But then you must start early in cultural history and you must begin with the alphabet and the movable letters of Gutenberg. Because writing is a technology consisting of a tool like a pen and a storage medium like paper, and you have to learn it as a technology, that is how to use it as a tool. If you are against media because of its evident mechanical and apparative (technical) character, it's ok, but then you must also be against music, because the piano is a mechanical toy, purely mechanical, and the trumpet is purely a machine to produce sound. It needs in all cases software, a score or an algorithm to create a mental and sensory event. People who criticize media because of

technology, have no idea of what culture is about, because culture was always linked to technology and the technological progress from piano to synthesizer has changed the sound of music as the technological progress from easel painting to computer screen has changed the look of visuals.

6) Related to the previous question, how and when the “spectator” becomes the “user”, an interacting user? It seems to me that there’s a cultural gap to be fixed. What approach have you created and / or followed to reach this goal? For what i had the chance to experience, you have succeeded in this research, personally viewing how people enjoy the Ars Electronica festival and the ZKM, using their codecs to understand how to communicate with the artworks.

In 20th century art the artists and we have terminated the classical art program. The classical art had as mission statement since Leonardo da Vinci to depict the visible shapes of things with the means of painting like point, line, plane, volume, light, etc. After 1900 (take as an example the book of W. Kandinsky: Point and Line to Plane, 1926) the artist used only the first half of the mission statement (the means of representation) and suppressed the second part (the visible things). This self-representation of the means of representation is called abstract art. Since the things have been banned from representation, since it was not allowed to represent reality in images any more, an artist like Duchamp said, let's represent the things themselves. This self-representation of reality substituted in the second half of 20th century completely all the prior modes of representation. Everything that was representation became reality: Instead of landscape painting we have land art, instead of portrait painting we have body art, instead of interior and still life painting we have object art, assemblage, installation, and environment. Instead of painted water falls we have real water falls, instead of painted clouds we have real clouds in the museum, and finally we have the real visitor resp. spectator as part of the art work, be it in participatory practices or sculpture or interactive media installations. Not only the artist is present, but also the public. Just think of the performance of Marina Abramovic in the MoMA. When modern art opened to new materials and new media, the spectator slowly became the user. In the new media it is the user, who constructs the art work. This new feature of media expanded also to classical media. Therefore we have Tino Sehgal, Franz Erhard Walter, etc. I opened the way to the participation of the public with my video installation Audience exhibited (1969), a close-circuit installation that showed live and delayed the visitors of the gallery. The transformation of the viewer to the user is one of the most successful achievements of media art.

7) How Ars Electronica and the ZKM could show the Art System the path to the future of experiencing these new forms of media art and, i would say, in general, of experiencing the arts in a general way? As you maybe know, here in Italy, among other countries, only a small segment of young people spend their time in a museum for several reasons: less pushing towards interactivity, the museum conceived as a totem, and so on...what’s the museum (or, in general, the space in which artworks are shown and “experienced”) of tomorrow?

It seems to me that most museums in Europe have a wrong title. They call themselves Museum of Modern Art or Museum of Contemporary Art. But they should call themselves »Museum of Modern or Contemporary Painting«, because what they show is mostly paintings and mostly paintings before 1900. You never see any sculptures, maybe two or three, if the museum has a garden. You see no environments nor assemblages nor installations, nearly no photographs, no video works, no film works, no examples of sound art, no performances. You see nothing from the major achievements of 20th century art, except abstract or figurative

paintings. What you see in the museum is what the market likes to sell. Therefore the artists organize themselves many independent festivals or critical curators organize hundreds of biennials to show the contemporary art production. One of the festivals is the Ars Electronica. When I was its artistic advisor and artistic director from 1986 to 1995, I was always ahead and did not follow trends. I created trends. The first exhibition and big symposium on the World Wide Web I organized already in 1995. I organized exhibitions and symposia about control and observation, about nanotechnology, cyber culture, artificial intelligence, robots, intelligent things and houses, intelligent cars and wearable computing years avant la lettre. When I published the catalogue of Ars Electronica Im Netz der Systeme. Für eine interaktive Kunst in 1989 with Gerd Lischka as a special number of Kunstforum, everybody in the art world and in the art magazines was against interactive art. I was humiliated. Now interactivity has become our daily bread. This is an example how impulses from the periphery after decades can change the flow of the mainstream. In a networked society this transformation can become easier, as you see in the critical activism of citizens. This is the role of ZKM: to be a critical citizen, to be a critical activist. Whatever we invented, whatever we showed first, years later it was imitated and simulated partially by mainstream museums. Nevertheless most museums think that the public is afraid of contemporary media art and therefore these museums are afraid of the public and contemporary media. ZKM is neither afraid of the public nor contemporary media art. We learn and know that also the public is not afraid of contemporary media art, just the opposite. We have hundreds of thousands of visitors every year in a small city with only 300.000 thousand inhabitants, Karlsruhe. We have more visitors than mainstream museums in metropolis with 2 million inhabitants, which show Monet, Degas and Picasso, etc. all over again and again.

8) If we think about the recent past, the technology have given the chance to generate several art forms. I think about the virtual art, the augmented reality based artworks, the bio art, the device art...now our smartphones are more than just a tool in our hands, and the ZKM, with the AppArtWorld, shows how much important this tools could be. Will the portable smartphones, tablets etc... have an important role in the art forms of tomorrow. What faces will have the media art of tomorrow?

Yes, portable smartphones, tablets etc. will play an important role in the art forms of tomorrow. From cave paintings to fresco and finally to the easel painting we experience the path of mobility. You cannot take away a painting from the wall, but you can take an easel painting from the wall. These have been the first steps of portable painting, resp. image. Now the smartphone is the last step of portable images. Literature has changed with the book, with mobile letters and the typewriter. The image wanders from guest medium to guest medium, from canvas to monitor, from page to screen. Painting is characterized by the logic of production. Modern media are characterized by the logic of distribution, which will shape the art forms of the future.

The new tools demonstrate a noetic turn. After the linguistic turn, which said the model of the world is language, after the iconic turn, which said the image is the model of the world, we learn that tools change and construct the world. From the bible (»In the beginning was the word«) to Wittgenstein (»The limits of my language are the limits of my world«) people believed in a language based culture. Later there was a debate between friends and foes about the power of image-based culture. Now, when we look around, we experience the regime of tools.

9) Why new media art is not so present (i would say, absent) into the more worldwide well-known museums? Why the Art System often doesn't seem to be interested in showing this kind of artworks and, in general, the different experiential approach that these works require? Where's the problem?

The problems of the art system are mostly to be found in the art system itself. One problem started around 1800 when Hegel had reasons to declare the end of art while observing romanticism. He said in short, the mission of religion was taken over by art, but art failed as a medium to convey the truth about the world. Only philosophy is the medium of the absolute, the highest knowledge. Hegel established a competition between three systems of world description and interpretation. Strangely enough he did not mention politics. A reason for this might be that the essay of Max Weber (Politics as Profession) appeared no sooner than 1919. I understand that around 1800 he could not realize the future potential of science and its product: the industrial revolution. But today we know that we have a minimum of six competitive systems of world interpretation and world transformation: art, religion, philosophy, politics, science, and technology. The powerful return of religion is an astonishing and much debated phenomenon. It is not the place here to discuss what it means and what the consequences will be. What I will hint to is that science and technology are far ahead of all other systems in changing and interpreting the world in the most effective way and that politics is number three. Therefore modern state represents itself not by culture or art but by science and technology. One of the reasons is that art has refused to expand its tools into technical tools like science did. Most artists stayed with canvas and brush. But medicine, astronomy, etc. moved forward with new tools into hitherto invisible zones. The artists stayed on the surface of things, in the horizon of natural perception, but science starts, where perception ends. Therefore art has excluded itself from the construction of the modern world and was not even willing to participate in the competition of world systems. In a paraphrase of John Dewey's wonderful book *The Public and its Problems* (1927) I would say the art is the problem. In the chain of pro deo, pro reo, pro domo, you see the transitions of art as slavery: First it is a service for priests and popes, the clerical power, then it is a service for aristocratic and military power, and finally it is a service for haute bourgeoisie and oligarchy. The church, the king, and the oligarch support and pay the arts. The FIFA system is everywhere: Who pays, is the one, who gets (i.e. the Matthew effect). The market stops and hedges the evolution of art. It is not by accident that the hedgefonds are the most important clients of the art system. Because what they do in economics, i.e. to hedge, the market does with the arts. New media art is too complex to maintain, too intelligent to understand – therefore the oligarchs, the market, and the museums stay away.

10) In the last few years, we've assisted to the rise of the VR experiences market, in particular thanks to the Oculus Rift and to similar "tools", and during the Ars Electronica 2014 i've had the chance to experience a "virtual web navigation" thanks to a sort of HMD. How the virtual art of the 90's influenced the recent interest in virtual experiences related to videogames and the watching of movies and where the new "virtual artists" are currently moving their interests? Why are we concentrating more on AR possibilities instead of VR experiences?

We owe to Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*), Jorge Luis Borges and Jean Baudrillard the fable of the map and the land. Reality is the land and media are the map. According to normal expectancy the map reflects correctly the land and media depict correctly reality. Since a while we know that this is not the case. We know that the media give a wrong picture of reality. We know from Heidegger to Baudrillard that the picture comes first, the precession of simulacra. My theory is that the map constructs the land, and that media construct reality. Therefore technical tools like V.R. and A.R. only make transparent and evident the mechanisms of the construction of reality. Whenever you make a virtual simulation of reality, it is the first step to augment reality. Today people are not living in a homogenous uniform sensory environment with natural speed. The sensory environment of the classical natural organs has expanded: We see pictures, we hear radio

waves, we see photographs, moving images, texts from newspapers and from screens, etc. All this information comes with different speed from a car to a telephone call, from an SMS to a postcard. Different versions of reality are overlapping: The reality constructed by the senses and the reality constructed by the media – and today with the virtual web navigation we can expand our event horizon not only beyond res invisibilis, beyond perception, but even beyond our imagination.

I thank you for your precious time and i wish you all the best.