

Not Art Not Tech (2015)

*On the Role of Media Theory at
Universities of Applied Art,
Technology and Art and Technology*

Thank you for the chance to introduce my ideas. I'm a net artist, active in the field for 20 years, 16 of which I have spent teaching new media designers at Merz Akademie. I am also a co-author of the book *Digital Folklore*.¹ Since the beginning of the century I have collected, preserved and monumentalised the Web culture of the 90s. "What Does It Mean to Make a Web Page?" is the doctoral thesis I am currently working on.

As an artist, researcher and teacher I value user culture and medium specificity in both design and research, and as an everyday routine. I see my work as contributing to critical digital culture, media literacy and the development of languages and dialects of New Media.

But there have been many obstacles along the way. Three years ago, I grasped these and boiled them down to three: technology, experience and people. Or rather "technology", "experience" and "people"– I have nothing against any of these concepts unless they are used by hardware and software companies as substitutes for "computer", "interface" and "users".

Computer → Technology
Interface → Experience
Users → People

These substitutions are taking place on an epidemic scale and the situation is serious. In my essays "Turing complete user" and "Rich user experience (RUE)",² I trace the metamorphoses that happened to the terms "users" and "interfaces". Today, talking about the role of media theory at the University of Applied Arts, I would like to start to elaborate on "technology" and why "Art and Technology" should be resisted.

I should note that by defending the words in the left-hand column above, I always find myself in an unfortunate situation. First of all, because in our field you should always go for the new, the next term if you are unsatisfied with the current one – not backwards, at least not to the nearest past.

1 Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied, *Digital Folklore. To Computer Users, with Love and Respect* (Stuttgart 2009).

2 Both republished in this volume (pp. 12–37 and pp. 40–64).



Fig. 1 a, b: Merchandise of the Rhizome event 2014 in New York.

Nobody wants to be called “user”. The effort to deface this word has been both enormous and successful. Even when you understand that “people” coming from the tech industry’s mouth is pure hypocrisy, you would still prefer to fight for your user rights by calling yourself a “digital citizen”, not a “user” ... although there is no digital city, state or constitution. And I also find myself in awkward situations – take now as a case in point – because I know that there is an Art and Technology department at your university; and because in a moment I am going to use as an example an institution with which I have very close relations, and which is probably the only one in the world that supports my work, because it is devoted to net art and keeping an archive of it: namely, Rhizome at the New Museum in New York.

A year ago, during their community campaign, Rhizome, whose priority is to push critical digital culture, released nicely designed bags. If it had been another organisation, or if it had been a bag of a size that didn't suggest that its purpose is to carry your personal computer around, I would have passed it by, but this was not the case, so I vandalised the bag.

"Don't fall for the word 'technology'," Ted Nelson concludes in the last paragraph of *Geeks Bearing Gifts*.³ "It sounds determinate. It hides the fights and the alternatives. And mostly it is intended to make you submissive." He appeals to us not to accept computer technology as WYSIWYHAM – his own acronym for what you see is wonderfully, happily, absolutely mandatory – but to see the tensions, the history and the alternatives.⁴ It is an important call, but only one-third of the argument I have against the term "technology". Submission is one issue, but sedation is even more important. "Technology" as a replacement for digital technology or computer technology, which in turn are already substitutes "for programmed systems", is a figure of speech known as a synecdoche: in this particular case when the whole is referring to a part.

It is a rhetorical trope that makes the computer dissolve in all other technologies, becoming an invisible part, just one of many technologies. This is in the interest of the industry, because it makes users unaware of the computer as a system that is programmed, that can be reprogrammed at any moment, and that could potentially be programmed or reprogrammed by its users.

There are (re)programmable technologies and many that are not programmable. But constant repetition of the word "technology" instead of computers, sedates and makes you forget that the system you hold in your hands is a programmable one.

It appears that another good reason to say "technology" instead of "computer" is that – so they say – computers are inside almost every piece of

3 Ted Nelson, *Geeks Bearing Gifts* (Sausalito, CA 2009), p. 196.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

technology anyway, or as Kevin Kelly writes in his book, *What Technology Wants* – not recommended reading, but I can't avoid mentioning it here – “these days all technology follows computer technology”.⁵

At the end of the day, “technology” is explicitly used as a new word for “computer”, not any other technologies, including digital ones, but explicitly only digital ones. So the purpose is to avoid saying “computer”. Indeed, “technology” is not a synecdoche but a euphemism.

“It's time to give up this talk of technology with big T and instead figure out how different technologies can boost and compromise the human condition.” Evgeny Morozov makes a rare constructive suggestion in his sour *To Save Everything Click Here*.⁶

It is tempting to agree, but I would argue again that both “Technology” with capital T as well as “technologies” with a small t should be replaced by “computer” with whatever size c. I know computer is an abstraction as well, but it still connotes algorithmic powers, programmability. It describes what happens with society, with culture, with arts.

Rhizome's most successful event is Seven on Seven. The promotional text says: “Seven on Seven pairs seven leading artists with seven visionary technologists, and challenges them to make something new – an artwork, a prototype, whatever they imagine.”⁷

Technologists are people of different backgrounds, including art or at least artistic ambitions, with something in common: they can program or – which is more often the case lately – they represent the software industry. Art and Technology as of today, or even “Art&Tech” – a term I learnt about in early 2014 while reading articles reporting on both Seven on Seven and the monumental exhibition Digital Revolution at Barbican, London, July 3 –September 14, 2014 – is not a revolutionary art form or an artistic movement. Art&Tech is, like “technology”, a figure of speech.

5 Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York 2010), p. 159.

6 Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York 2014), p. 323.

7 <https://sevenonseven.art>, access: November 2, 2020.

It swiftly replaces Computer Art, Digital Art, Media Art. Art&Tech alludes to the almost 50 years old Experiments with Art and Technology (E.A.T.) programme of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In 1967, E.A.T. was promoted as artists bridging the world of technophobes and technophiles, art entering the world of engineers, “working with materials that only industry can provide”.⁸ Contemporary art institutions love Art and Technology as a brand because it offers a strong connection to E.A.T., which is both history and establishment, and a celebrated example of artists collaborating with West Coast industries.

In 2016 I will take part in an epochal 70-artist group exhibition, which will be held in Whitechapel, London. The title is “Electronic Superhighway”, a term coined by Nam June Paik in 1974, but the show is, in my honest opinion, artificially extended back to 1966, to be less media/computer/internet, to include artefacts of E.A.T., and be more “tech”. “Technology” sedates. “Art&Tech” beams loyalty.

* * *

Siegfried Zielinski writes:

*Terms are the frameworks of abstraction, which we need for thinking and acting in ways that are interventions. The definitions that we make should satisfy two important criteria. They should be of a provisional character and should be open enough to allow further operations.*⁹

“Technology”, though sounding open enough, is today a term that turns scaffolding into a fence, Gerüste into Rüstung, it disarms those who would want to approach the field critically.

8 Maurice Tuchman, *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County, Museum of Art* (Los Angeles 1971), p. 11.

9 Siegfried Zielinski, [... *After the Media*]. *News from the Slow-Fading Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis 2013), pp. 13–14.

The spreading of the word “technology” reminds me (although is not exactly the same as) the shift that took place 15–20 years ago, when the digital computer or digital medium was substituted by “New Media”. In 2000 Janet Murray optimistically interpreted this process in her introduction to *The New Media Reader* as “a sign of our current confusion about where these efforts are leading and our breathlessness at the pace of change, particularly in the last two decades of the 20th century”.¹⁰

The breathlessness is gone, together with the century: New Media evangelists became angry men, new media optimists turned into sceptics. Sherry Turkle, who in 1984 believed or transmitted the belief of one of her respondents in *The Second Self* – “If people understand something as complicated as computer, they will demand greater understanding of other things”¹¹ – 30 years later ends her *Alone Together* with the words: “We deserve better. When we remind ourselves that it is we who decide how to keep technology [sic!] busy, we shall have better.”¹²

As Zielinski points out in the introduction to [... *After the Media*], “An update of the promise that the media could create a different, even a better world seems laughable from the perspective of our experience with the technology-based democracies of markets.”¹³

Along with “the better world”, turning into “making the world a better place” (every second start-up’s objective); along with computers turning into invisible computers, media arts into Art&Tech; and the rise of technology as the invisible computer, research in media, new media and media theory itself was going through difficult times.

“Through the monumental exertions of the twentieth century, they have also become time-worn,”¹⁴ Zielinski concludes. After the Media belongs to a growing number of texts that elaborate on the situation where media

10 Janet Murray, Inventing the medium, in: *The New Media Reader*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA 2003), p. 3.

11 Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self. Computers and the Human Spirit* (Cambridge, MA 2004 [1984]), p. 164f.

12 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together. Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York 2011), p. 296.

13 Zielinski, [... *After the Media*], p. 18.

14 Ibid

theory finds itself in the position of “after”, “post”, “no” and general past tense. [... *After the Media*] (Zielinski), *Media After Kittler* (Ikoniadou and Wilson),¹⁵ “Media after media” (Siegert),¹⁶ *Anti-Media* (Florian Cramer).¹⁷ Post-digital, post-#occupy and post-prism. “What Were Media?” (“Was waren Medien?”) was an important event and publication organised by Claus Pias at the University of Vienna in 2006/07¹⁸ – almost a decade ago – as was the 2007 transmediale conference with the panel Media Art Undone: here even past perfect tense is used. The latter was also the moment for me personally to give up and claim that I would never talk about the difference between media art and net art publicly.¹⁹ I didn’t know that, some years later, as a net artist I would be confronted with “Post-Internet”.

Words are important. There is a huge gap (or at least the potential for it) between “after” and “post”. “Post” is loaded with crisis, rejection, the urge for action. “After” is fatigue, exodus, but not only that: it is also a change of the perspective to a bird’s eye view, a chance to grasp from the outside what is happening around you or was even built by you before.

Jussi Parikka writes in his postscript to *Media After Kittler*: “Just when we were supposed to reach the peak excitement about media technological innovation – the biggest innovation revealed to be about its disappearance.”²⁰ Well, it was neither a conspiracy nor a sudden turn or force majeure.

On the one hand, media theory situated in applied arts can be seen in a meaningful and pleasant neighbourhood. Who, if not media designers,

15 Eleni Ikoniadou and Scott Wilson (eds.), *Media After Kittler* (London 2015).

16 Bernhard Siegert, Media after media, in: *Media After Kittler*, eds. Ikoniadou and Wilson.

17 Florian Cramer, *Anti-media. Ephemera on Speculative Arts* (Rotterdam 2013).

18 Cf. the proceedings: Claus Pias (ed.), *Was waren Medien?* (Zurich 2011).

19 Olia Lialina, Flat against the wall. For Media Art Undone panel at Transmediale.07 (2007), http://art.teleportacia.org/observation/flat_against_the_wall/, access: November 2, 2020.

20 Jussi Parikka, Postscript: Of disappearances and the ontology of media (studies), in: *Media After Kittler*, eds. Ikoniadou and Wilson, p. 178.

media and transmedia artists, should be interested or be made interested in the ways media becomes the message and defines the situation? Who, if not them, are to be nurtured with media theory's ideas, and in return give back in the form of artworks, artistic research and designs?



Fig. 2: Video montage by Olia Lialina, "Marshall McLuhan, Full lecture: The medium is the message, 1977 / Official Apple (New) iPad Trailer, 2012" (2015).

At the same time it is not a peaceful situation – on the contrary, maybe it is the most challenging circumstance for media theory, because (if the curriculum is balanced and up to date) the students have to learn the origins of digital culture, computer science, read Vannevar Bush, J.C.R. Licklider, Alan Kay, Alan Turing, Joseph Weizenbaum, Don Norman, those who conceptualised and theorised digital media. New Media Art departments – for media studies – are not just places where theory meets praxis, where media theory meets media praxis (and art meets tech), but where two theories meet each other, two traditions, two schools of thought: one is all about revealing, the other about hiding. McLuhan's interview is from 1977 and Apple's ad from 2012. You can read my collage (Fig. 2) as it is now and was then, theory and practice, but keep in mind that while McLuhan was writing, Alan Kay was writing and Adele Goldberg was writing, they were not proto-typing, they conceptualised a meta-medium. Don Norman, a doctor of philosophy and a cognitive scientist, who is today known as the father of user-centred design, was – while McLuhan was talking – criticising the philosophy of Unix and was himself already

working on a paradigm that would result in computers becoming invisible technology.

So, what to do with this clash of theories, concepts and intentions, apart from using students' heads as magic pots, where both would melt into a brilliant project or writing?

If you ask me what the big deal is today, and the task for media theory, it would be to go into confrontation. Not to analyse the media of today, but question the assumptions on which they were built and take care of the generation who could rebuild them.

Media theory, with its half-a-century experience in and toolbox for revealing things, could play a leading role in educating people who can change the paradigm of media. What I argue for is turning around the "practical turn", to examine the concepts and theories underlying the practice. For example: to question Licklider's postulates on what computers can do best and suggest models that are different from the man-computer symbiosis; to argue for ambiguity in software architecture, to question "variability" as a principle of new media as well as "automation"; to establish another, counter-paradigm: "The computer of the future should be visible". This is the main topic on my agenda for media theory.

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Now to the more obvious matter: theory and practice.

Media theory and media artists are the closest colleagues. We appear in the same exhibitions and publications, we share panel sofas.

What would post-digital as a philosophy do without post-internet as a phenomenon? What would net criticism do without net artists? These were the artists who conceptualised the field and are still busy reconceptualising it.

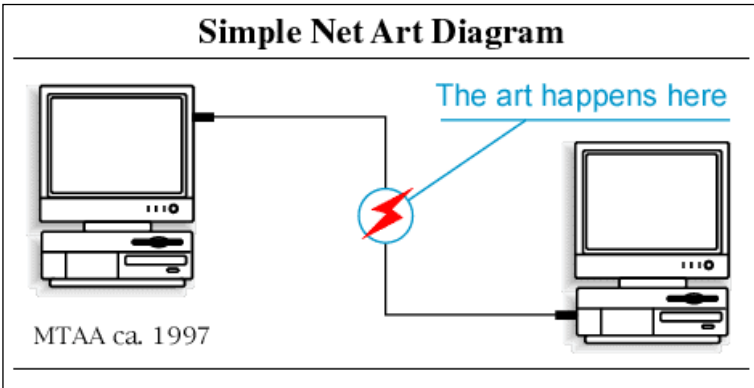
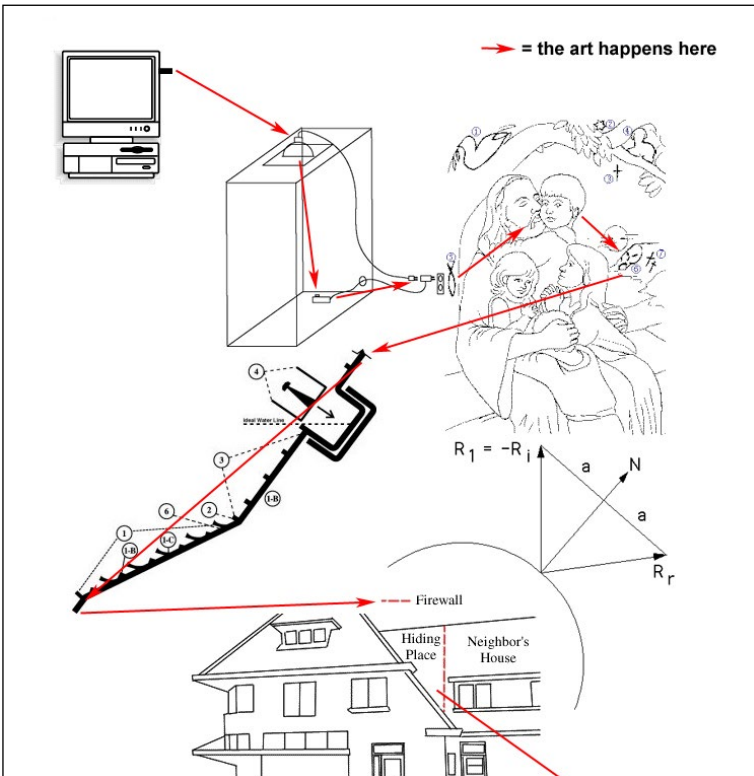
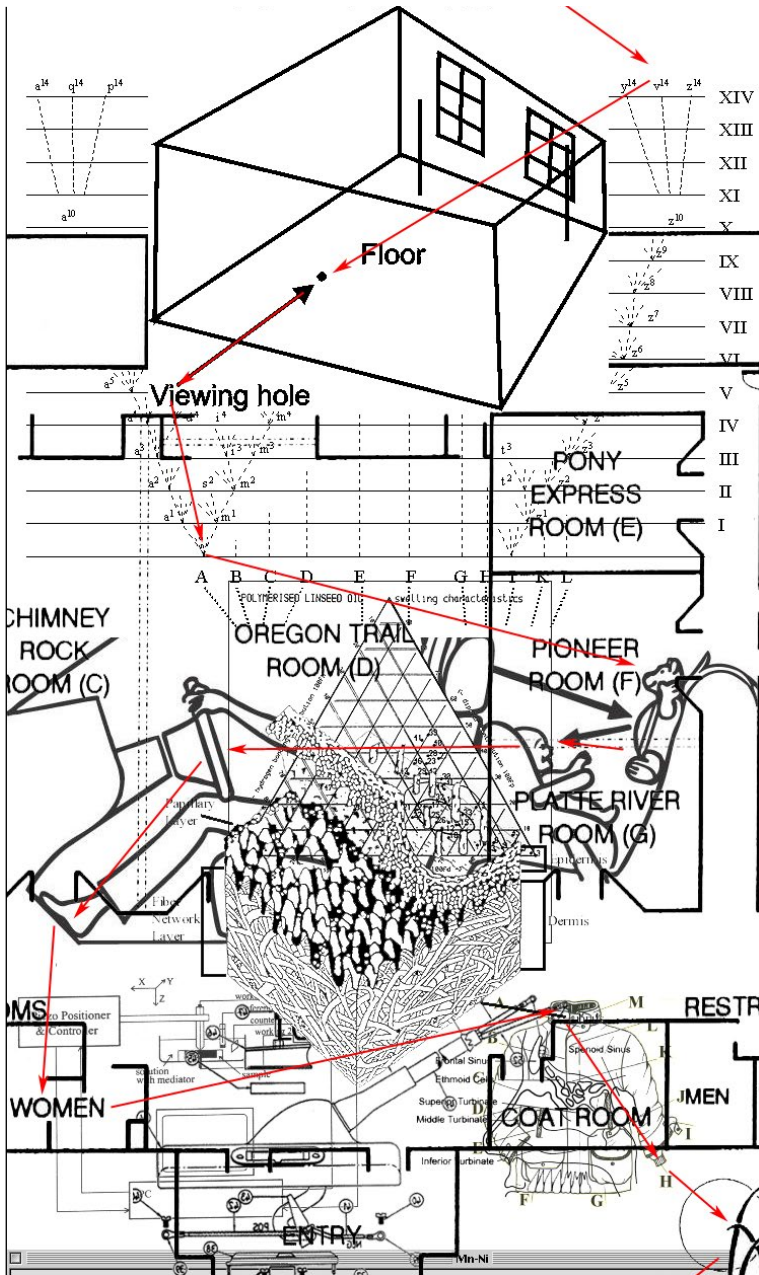
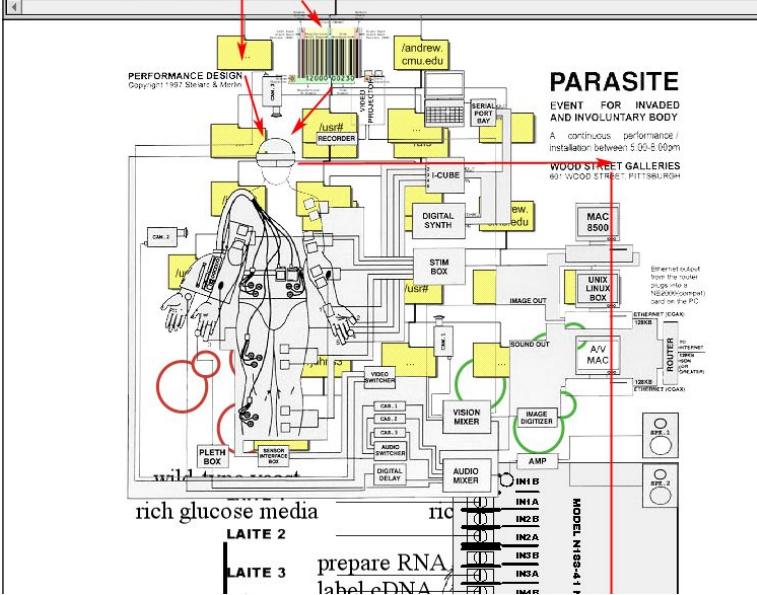
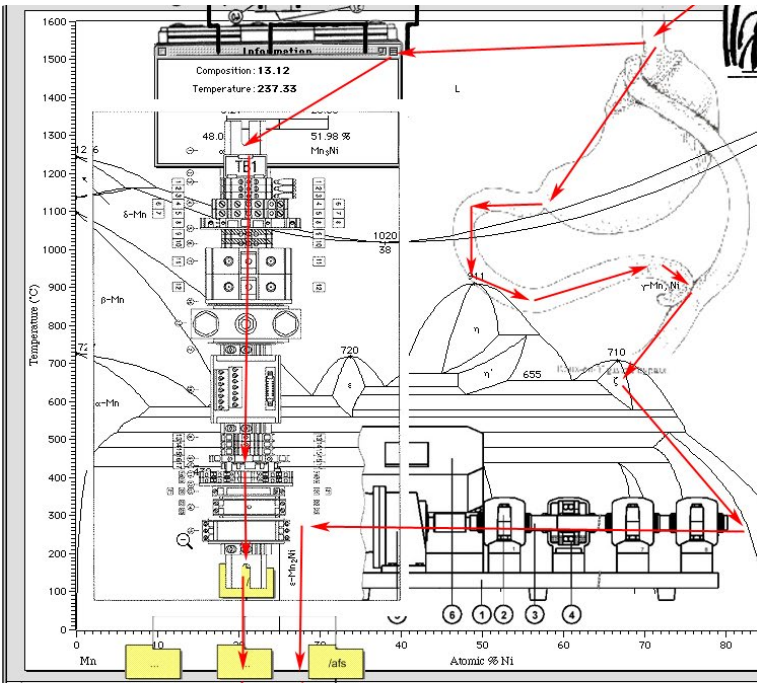
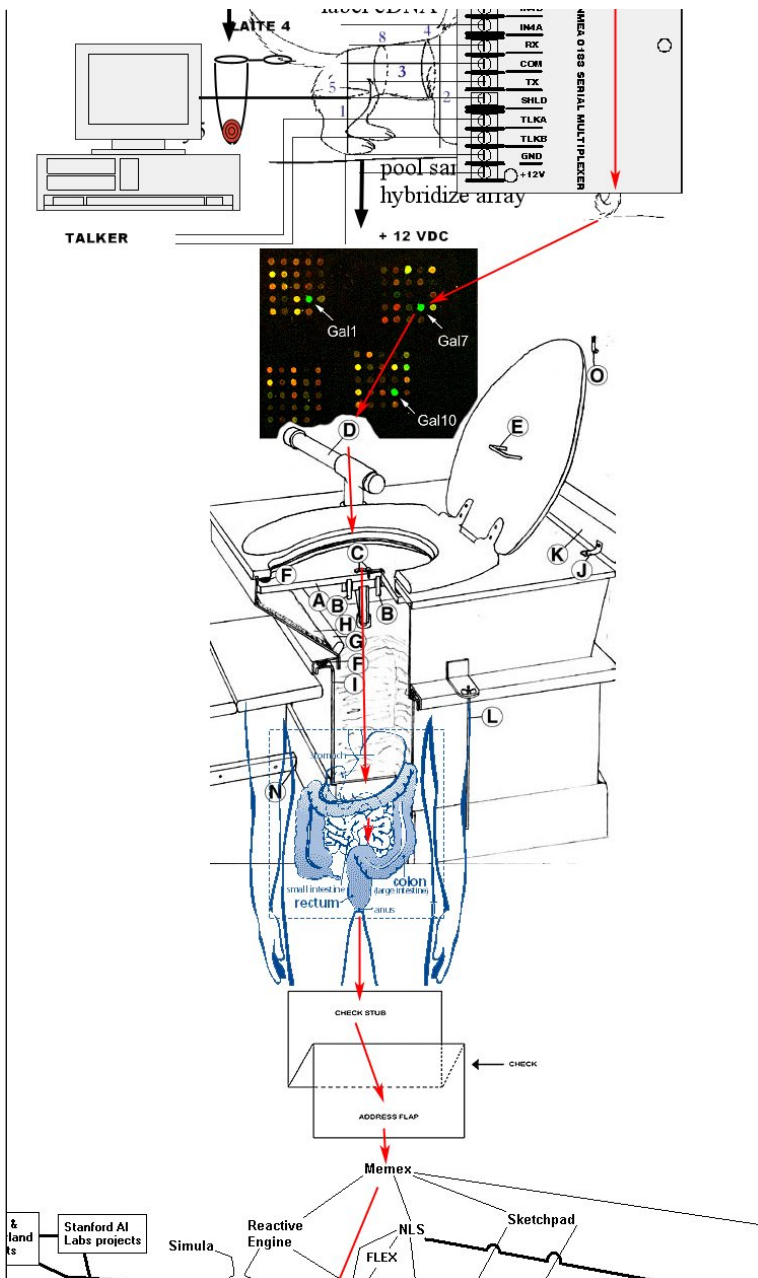


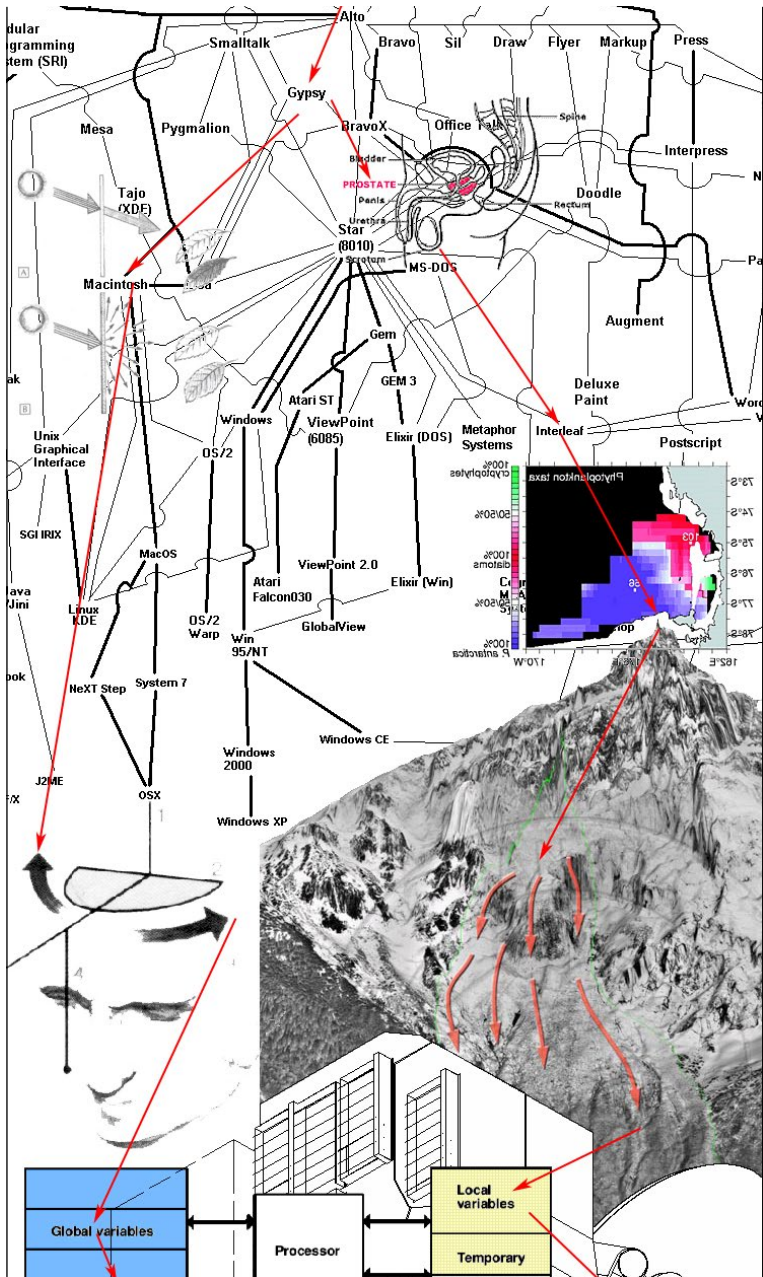
Fig. 3: MTAA, Simple Net Art Diagram, 1997.

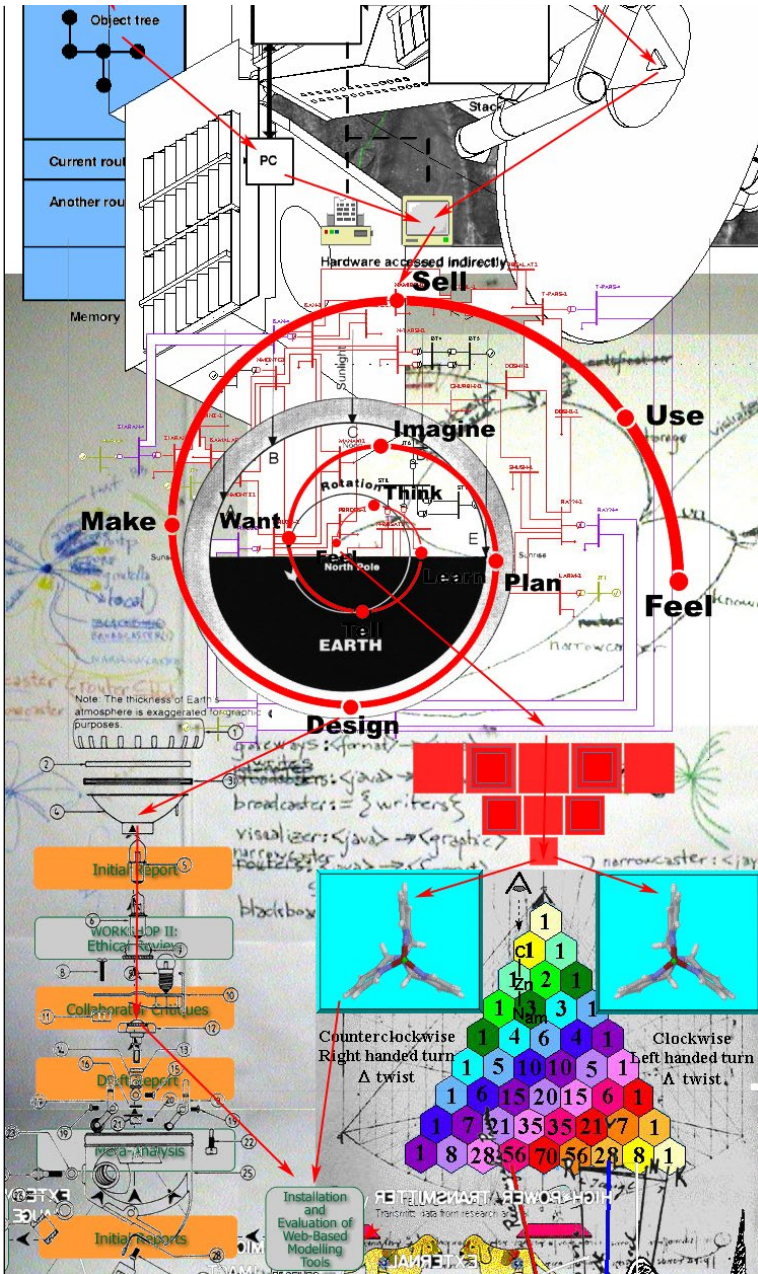


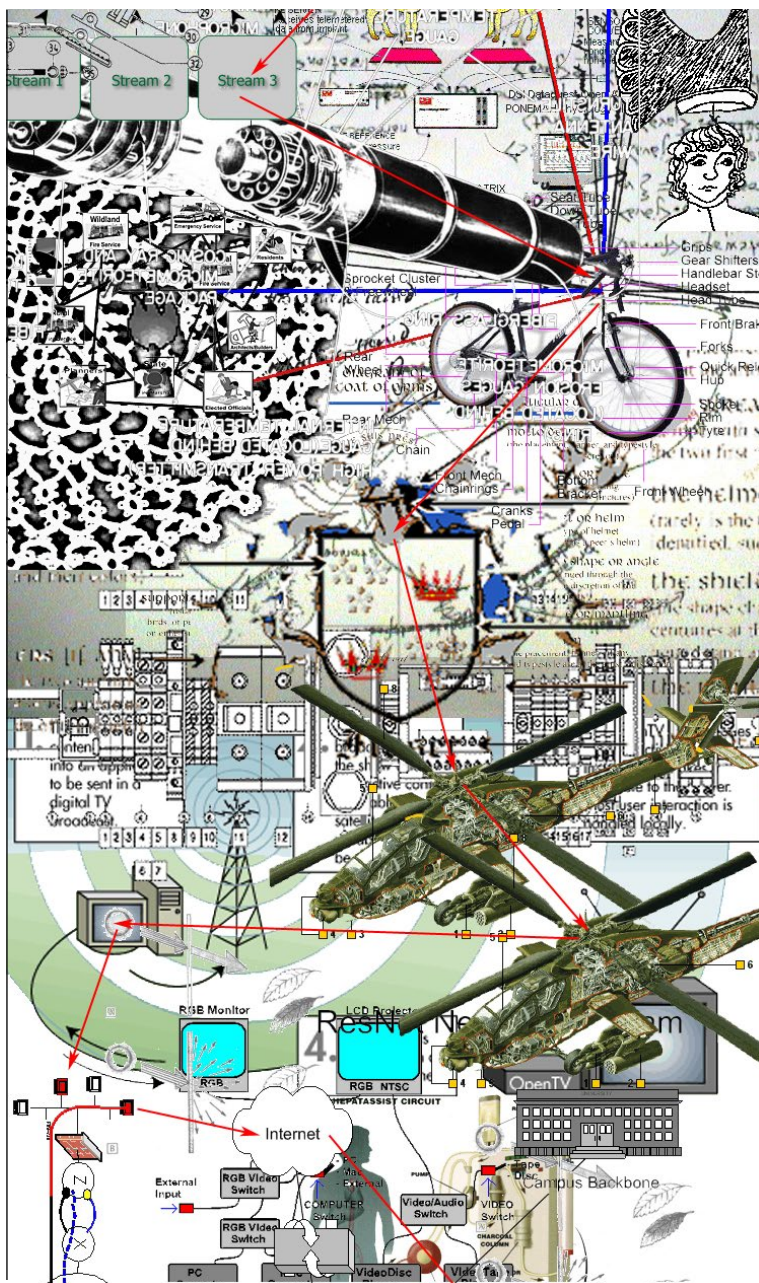












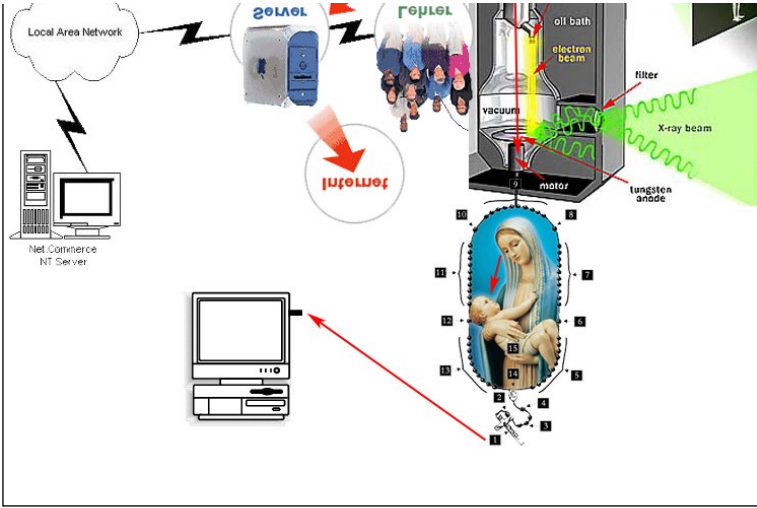


Fig. 4: Abe Lincoln, Complex Net Art Diagram, 2003.

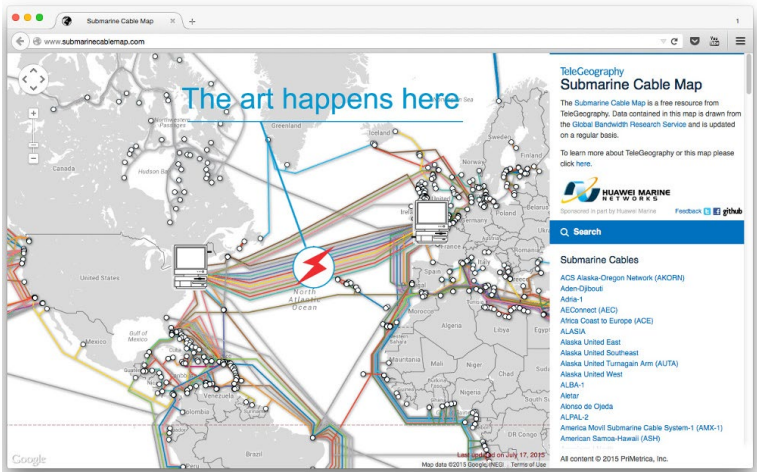


Fig. 5: Evan Roth, Simple Net Art Diagram, 2015 (based on the map by TeleGeography).

These were the artists who conceptualised the field and are still busy reconceptualising it, from M.River & T.Whid Art Associates' (MTAA) 1997 Simple Net Art Diagram, which drew attention to the true spirit of net art, through to Rick Silva's (a.k.a. Abe Lincoln) response to it, to Evan Roth's map from 2015, which is showing a strong or even hypertrophied emphasis on the physical, material hardware in today's net art scene.

From its first days, media theory and cultural theory regarded artists fondly. Theorists count on artists as being the first to explore and make sense out of new media, or the most powerful to resist. They look at their work in search of arguments for their theories (which I think caused some misconceptions in New Media). Critical thinkers of all schools look with hope at creative minds.

On the last pages of his aforementioned book – which made fun of every corner of Silicon Valley and every previous attempt to criticise it – Evgeny Morozov makes an effort to be optimistic and turns his eyes toward artistic experiments with the “internet of things”. Even the most disillusioned theorists are ready to fall for the charms of Art&Tech.



Fig. 6: Video montage by Olia Lialina, “Vilém Flusser, ‘On writing, complexity and technical revolutions’, 1988 / Silicon Valley Season 1: Episode 1, 2014” (2015).

“What are those who sit in front of their computers, pressing keys, making lines, surfaces and shapes, actually doing? They realize opportunities”, writes Vilém Flusser in “Digitaler Schein”.

The “Verwirklichen von Möglichkeiten” (the realisation of opportunities) that Flusser so generously assigned to programmers or users of com-

puter programs 25 years ago should be seen as an instruction.²¹ It could become a core for any new media curriculum. What kind of opportunities students are realising is the question, though. How to resist both: the “bit soup” – perpetual flirting with The Digital – and the demand for “apps!” of the Art&Tech market?

At the very moment I was preparing for this talk, a message arrived in my inbox: a petition from a few young and a few established media artists and media literate art institutions:

“Dear Apple, Bring art to the world and the world to art!
Please add an ‘Art’ category to the App Store.”



Fig. 7: Oľia Lialina, The art happens here, 2015.

21 Vilém Flusser, Digitaler Schein, in: Vilém Flusser, *Medienkultur*, ed. Stefan Bollmann (Frankfurt/M. 1997), p. 213; translated from the German („Was machen diejenigen eigentlich, die vor den Computern sitzen, auf Tasten drücken und Linien, Flächen und Körper erzeugen? [...] Sie verwirklichen Möglichkeiten.“).

In my picture of the world, if media artists are to enter into interaction with Apple, the main if not the only thing they should demand is to close the App Store. So I made some sarcastic tweets and even drew a caricature. But it seems my irony was too covert and the picture too cryptic, so it was interpreted as support for the campaign.

While I was busy with my tweets and angry image manipulation, terrible things were happening in Paris. The next morning was all about accumulating news and tracking friends.

I asked my daughter, who was studying in Paris last year, whether she had heard anything from her friends. "Almost everyone has marked safe," she said. Facebook's new feature for regions hit by natural disaster, which automates checking whether your loved ones are OK, was turned on after a terrorist attack for the first time. This act brought Facebook many likes. But also criticism. Users from Lebanon wanted to know why the safety mark was not activated some days earlier, when attacks happened in Beirut? They asked for it to be turned on; and very quickly after, Zuckerberg apologised and had it enabled.



Fig. 8

In no way do I mean to compare Beirut's demand to turn on this feature with media artists' appeal to turn on an art category in the App Store. I also think it is different from the frustration Russian Facebook users express now in their micro blogs: why is the French tricolour available as an avatar decoration, but no Russian flag theme was there when the Russian plane exploded in mid-air over Egypt?

Nevertheless, formally these events are similar: people around the globe are appealing to Silicon Valley for features and justice.

In "Media after media", Bernhard Siegert notes that "the concept of media has become completely identical with interfaces and digital objects that can be manipulated on the screen".²² This is a very astute observation and one can only add that those interfaces are provided by four, maybe five companies.

By researching or critically approaching media or "technology", we are in fact researching Apple, Google and Facebook, their algorithms, their interfaces, their pragmatism and aesthetic decisions.

* * *

Some weeks ago, the Algorithmic Regimes and Generative Strategies event took place at the Technical University of Vienna; I could only attend it online. Not to confront you solely with ideas of big dead men, at the end of my talk I chose some seconds of Olga Goriunova's lecture, in which she raises the question about the Digital Subject, Data Double, or one could say the Second Self of our times – identity as generated by algorithms.

I allowed myself to merge it with a video that makes use of Google's Deep Dream, the image-classifying algorithm that sees dogs everywhere. This past summer's visual mainstream looks like a dream by Timothy Leary and reads like Donna Haraway's scenario of chimeric machine-animal fusion implemented.

22 Siegert, *Media after media*, p. 85.

YouTube changes its interface every other day, Facebook rolls out global changes once in a while. Both routine and revolutionary changes provide food for thought, constantly. Not only among theoreticians, but everybody. Today everybody is a little McLuhan interpreting the messages of the media. What did Twitter mean when it changed stars to hearts? What does Google mean with dogs?

Google's algorithm sees dogs everywhere because it was trained to recognise dogs. Some questions have simple answers. It is practically impossible to find answers to serious questions like "what is the digital subject?"; even formulating those questions is a noble task, because rules, algorithms and terms change on the fly.



Fig. 9: Video montage by Olya Lialina, "Olga Goriunova on Digital Subject, 2015 / Deep Cheese Dreams by Neue Modern, 2015" (2015).

And when it comes to teaching media artists, media designers: how to formulate the questions? What should be used to excite and provoke students? To agendas I mentioned earlier – empowering students to change the invisible computing paradigm and refusing the "opportunity" of Art&Tech – let me add another one:

Take time to formulate questions that cannot be answered by monopolies or by observing those monopolies.

