CURATING TECHNOCULTURES [2010]

Maria Chatzichristodoulou [aka Maria X]
School of Arts and New Media
University of Hull (Scarborough campus)
Filey Road, YO11 3AZ
Scarborough, North Yorkshire
U.K.
Email: M.Chatzi@hull.ac.uk
URL: <http://www.hull.ac.uk/sanm/>

This paper sets out to discuss issues of curation of media arts and other emergent technologised practices (e.g. digital performance). Through examining a range of media art festivals, exhibitions and events from the 1990s to 2010, this paper will argue against the curation of media arts as practices that are divorced from the contemporary arts scene. I will suggest that this curatorial approach of positive discrimination can lead to: a) establishing emergent technologised practices as peripheral to other, often more popular or mainstream, (sub-)cultures (and thus markets) and, b) technological determinism (in this case, focus on the technologies at the expense of content, social impact and/or affect).

In 1998 I co-founded, with Manthos Santorineos (Associate Professor, Athens School of Fine Arts), the *1st Hellenic Art and Technology Festival (HATF)* in Athens, Greece. A year later the festival expanded to become international with a focus on the area of Southeast Europe and the Mediterranean, and was renamed *Medi@terra*. Its aim was to showcase the (at the time) emergent field of media arts. This was the first time a large-scale event in Greece had brought together arts and emergent technologies. The festival embraced a range of artistic practices, which, until that time, had no place within the Greek contemporary art scene. *HATF* did not have an overarching theme: it simply invited, through a call for projects, artistic practices that integrated digital technologies, and it/we commissioned works along the same lines.

The fields under which we invited works for submission were defined in relation to the different formats the projects could take, such as: interactive installations (for interactive projects which manifest themselves, in one way or another, as objects or environments within physical space), animation and video art (for screen-based works), net.art (for projects that exist solely online), CD-ROM art (for digital projects that exist off-line), digital photography and print (for digital imaging works) and sound art (for digital sound/music works). At the time several 'media/digital art' festivals were taking place, such as *Ars Electronica* (Linz, Austria), [1] *Inter-Society for Electronic Arts* (international organisation based in Canada, nomadic event), [2]

Transmediale (Berlin, Germany), [3] *European Media Art Festival* (Osnabrueck, Germany), [4] *Dutch Electronic Arts Festival* (Rotterdam, Netherlands), [5] *VIPER* (Basel, Switzerland) [6] and *Multimedia Arts Asia Pacific* [7] among others. Several of these festivals, such as *Ars Electronica* and *Transmediale*, still thrive today (2009).

The approach favoured by the 1st *HATF*, that is, inviting works on the basis of their format and media rather than content or subject-matter, was in accord with the international media arts community: all the above mentioned festivals also did (and still do) invite works on a similar basis, thus generating taxonomies within which the emergent artistic practices we were aiming to showcase could be ‘neatly’ categorised. Throughout the (brief) history of the genre, these taxonomies have primarily focused on the format of the work, the way the work manifests itself within the physical domain, and the technologies employed, rather than the qualitative issues of concept, content, and dramaturgy (in relation to interactive artworks which are performative in their nature). Such taxonomies were, I think, strengthened when Christiane Paul’s book *Digital Art* was published in 2003. In this, Paul argues:

It is problematic to claim that all digital artworks can be neatly categorized according to different forms: most of the time, these works combine various elements (...) and defy a purely formal classification. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the formal aspects upon which the art is based. Ultimately, every object—even the virtual one—is about its own materiality, which informs the ways in which it creates meaning. Among the forms that a digital artwork can take are installation; film, video, and animation; Internet art and software art; and virtual reality and musical environments. [8]

The forms that Paul identifies are not identical to the ones identified by the 1st *HATF*. Indeed, such discrepancies have been common across the field, as formal categories are subject to constant change, updating and revisiting (following new practices but also signifying differing curatorial approaches). For example, the 1st *HATF* did not include ‘film’ as a form in its call: we considered film to be an older medium that was already being showcased elsewhere. It did not include virtual reality environments either, but this was due to the technical requirements of such artworks: in order to showcase a virtual reality environment we would have needed to acquire and install a VR system (such as a CAVE, for example).

These were particularly costly at the time, and people with the technical knowledge and expertise required to install and operate this technology were few and far between (Medi@terra 2000 did include VR works in the Call, as we were able to use the Hellenic Institute’s newly installed CAVE system). Despite discrepancies in formal categories, one thing was consistent across the international community of media arts festivals: they all invited works invested in emergent technologies—other, non-technologised types of artworks did not normally have a place within these contexts—

and they mostly did so through categorising the works on the basis of formal rather than conceptual, aesthetic, social or other criteria (I should point out that this approach of positive discrimination was possibly justified at the time, as media arts were rarely represented within more mainstream contemporary art contexts).

In 2002 Sergey Teterin (director), Olga Goriunova (curator) and Alexei Shulgin (consultant, curator) launched in Moscow (Russia) the *read_me festival 1.2* on software art and software art games. *Read_me 1.2* was the first festival “dedicated to the artistic contemplation of software: its creation, modification and deconstruction.” [9] The organisers of *read_me 1.2 festival* went on to develop *Runme.org*: an open, moderated database where people were invited to submit software art projects. [10] The next edition of the festival, *read_me 2.3*, took place the following year (2003) in Helsinki, based on the *Runme.org* database. [11] At the time I found *Runme.org* and *read_me 2.3* striking due to their exceptional structure: *Runme.org* was structured both “taxonomically/rationally (category list) and intuitively (keyword cloud)”. [12]

The category list was more expansive than most and ran as follows (these are only the main categories; each category featured several sub-categories; numbers in parenthesis indicate the amount of projects submitted under each category):

- algorithmic appreciation (2)
- appropriation and plagiarism (5)
- artificial intelligence (10)
- artistic tool (39)
- bots and agents (15)
- browser art (19)
- code art (21)
- conceptual software (31)
- data transformation (34)
- digital aesthetics r&d (9)
- digital folk and artisanship (18)
- existing software manipulations (7)

games (15)

generative art (48)

hardware transformation (7)

installation-based (6)

institutional critique (7)

performance-based (10)

political and activist software (25)

social software (5)

software cultures - links (15)

system dysfunctionality (10)

text - software art related (47)

text manipulation (36) [13]

Read_me was targeting works of a very specific genre, that is, works that could be approached as artistic software. Nonetheless, what this list of categories makes clear is that taxonomies, though ‘rational’, were generated on the basis of not only formalist but also conceptual criteria: for example, the categories ‘political and activist software’ and ‘social software’ taxonomise works in relation to their social and political agendas and impact, rather than the technologies employed or the way projects manifest themselves in space. Even more intriguing to me at the time was the intuitive approach (word cloud), which existed side by side with the taxonomical one. This was as follows:

1960s	collaboration	film	junk	open_source	psychiatric	surreal
1980s	collaborative	flash	knitting	outsource	python	surveillance
1990s	community	folk	labor	P2P	radio	sympiosis
1996	conceptual	lawyer_resistant	paranoid	random	symmetry	formalist
1997	consciousness	found_object	lingo	parodyware	realtime	synesthesia
3d	constraints	fractal	linux	pascal	realworld	system
abstract	copyright	fragile	lisp	passionate	relaxing	talking
abuse	corruption	free software	literary	patterns	religious	taskbar
active	countercultural	friendly	live	performance	remix	telematic

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aesthetics	crash	frustrated	live_coding	performative	representation	templates
algorithmic	criticism	gadgety	love	perl	robot	terrorism
amiga	cute	generative	lowtech	philosophical	RSS	text
anachronistic	cyborg	genetic	mac	photography	sampling	trash
anti_information	dada	glitch	manifesto	PHP	scary	trivial
anthropomorphic	dangerous	goofy	Mapping	pixel	scientific	turing
apocalyptic	database	Google	market	plagiaristic	screensaver	tv
archetype	death	hackerly	marxist	playing	semantic	typing
archive	debate	hardware	mathematical	pocket_pc	seminal	unix
ascii	deconstructive	HCI	meme	poetry	serendipitous	unnoticeable
atari	decorative	historical	messaging	political	serial	useless
audiovisual	design	hoax	metaphorical	pop_culture	sexy	utility
authorship	desktop	html	metaphysical	porn	sharing	vectorial
automata	dhtml	identity	MIDI	positive	simulation	video
automation	disturbing	illegal	mindware	posix	sinclair	violence
backwards	dos	illustration	minimalistic	post dotcom	sing	virtual
BBS	drugs	imagery	mobile	postscript	smiley	virus
beos	dysfunctional	information	modal	power	social	visual
binary	eccentric	installation	montage	pragmatic	sound	voice
blog	ecological	instructive	multiuser	presence	spam	voyeur
body		educational	interactive	musical	privacy	speech
c	efficient	interface	network	probability	stimulation	windows
c64	email	intuitive	neural_net	process	storytelling	xxxxx
capitalism	error	irc	news	productivity	stream	
chaos	evangelist	ironic	noisy	programming	subjectivity	
chat	feedback	iterative	nude	propaganda	subversive	
code	feminist	java	obfuscated	provocative	supernatural	
coding	filesharing	javascript	on line	psychedelic	superstitious	

[14]

I consider *Runme/read me*, from a curatorial perspective, as revolutionary in its approach: it constituted the first attempt to question rigid formal categories in media arts and challenge the way curators and, possibly, artists thought about their works; at the same time, the festival did acknowledge the necessity and functionality of taxonomic systems and the near impossibility of abandoning them completely. *Runme/read me*'s approach is a playful and pertinent criticism of the long-standing attempts of curators and event organisers to neatly classify and formally categorise emergent fields of practice. The festival's intuitive structure succeeded in exposing the rigidity (and often absurdity) of such formal categories as well as the lack of

engagement with issues of content, social value and affect in the way festivals and showcases invited works for submission or commissioned new work.

Despite its attempt to question and unsettle formal categories for studying and presenting media arts, *Runme/read_me* remained firmly rooted within the tradition of presenting this emergent field of practice as independent from (peripheral to?) more mainstream contemporary art practices. As a result, although formal categories within the field were imaginatively challenged, the festival itself remains classified as a media arts festival, without any attempt to shake this (formalist) distinction (I do not intend this as a judgment on the cultural value and success of the event). I will go on to examine *Read_me/Runme.org*'s heritage today in relation to the curation of media arts and other emergent, technologised, practices.

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