Art and hyperreality
About art, media and technology
Anne Nigten, 2012

The qualification ‘art with a power plug’ which was used for media art for quite some time as well, has fortunately not been heard for many years now. To me this seems like a good development, because the by now abandoned term completely ignores the importance of several decades of experiments in the ‘unwritten public media space’. It is a space which is all too often overlooked in reflections on art in public spaces, while many interesting and valuable experiments took and take place here.

Techno-fetish
Increasingly we are living in a world which is medialized and consisting of networks. Since roughly about the middle of the previous century artists have been experimenting with the results of developments in media technology, either as a carrier or as a platform for new forms of art. In doing so the artists concerned not only observe and/or criticise these technological developments but they are also actively experimenting with these media themselves; speaking with Marshal McLuhan1, ‘the medium is the message’. For decades now, media artists worldwide have been submerging themselves in contemporary (media) technology. The established art discourse at first labelled these developments techno fetish, a glorification of technology. However; the development of media art in public spaces is only partly a story of technology. Retrospectively we see trends and shifts in media art which are a reflection and a comment on the international, socially-cultural and political zeitgeist. Media art experiments are difficult to summarise because of their global and disorganised nature and because it concerns not just one art movement or style.2 Experimental media artists continually assess new media spaces and claim the media channels of their time, through interventions which are often a critique of the broadcasts and the use of media. Mind, I’m not referring to radio or television programmes about art, such as the review-like programmes which we can still watch today. In the media art experiments I’m referring to the medium itself, the programme itself, is the work of art. Radio and television channels are used as free spaces for experiments, as a commentary on the fast and easily digestible regular programming. For example, in 1970 a four hour live video mix by Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut3 was broadcast as a live visual concert (V) performance) with an image-manipulation machine which worked according to the principles of an electronic piano. The video signal was processed on the spot and mixed as an electronic form of action-painting. The television set at home was the canvas for a dynamic video painting. What we see as well is media art from a more activist-like perspective. This projects political and cultural engagement in particular, in which the artists concerned use radio and television channels and the internet as an extension of the public debating space. An example of this perspective is the tactical media festival Next Five Minutes,4 which brought together art, politics and media from all over the world.
Public information space

The emergence of the internet at the end of the previous century meant a new impulse for media art. Since that time the role of networks, the meaning of underlying power structures and the effect of hypermedia on our perception and our daily life have been researched creatively and practically. Hypermedia are an extension of hypertext; image, design elements, sound, text and video are interwoven and linked. In its most recent expressions, artists aim their attention at awareness development of the individual about their place in hyperreality (where reality and virtuality can no longer be distinguished) and at the dark sides of the global (network) technology which surrounds us. Media art reaches us through all kinds of modern technological applications, such as apps for mobile phones. In this context I would like to point out a current development within media art in which media and ecology come together. The term techno-ecology surfaces at the end of the 1960s in cybernetics. Techno-ecology is introduced as a solution to problems current to the times: the Cold War with its nuclear threat, environmental pollution, an increasing world population and a depletion of natural resources. Often technological developments were considered the cause of these worldwide problems. However, according to a techno-ecological point of view technology and ecology should unite in one system, in which technology can contribute to solutions for, for example, the environmental pollution problem. An important observation regarding this ‘whole earth vision’ is that at first this originated from optimism concerning technology. The concept of an integrated techno-ecological system was received with a great deal of scepticism by outsiders. Recent developments in for example biotechnology however, have brought about an strongly increased interest in techno-ecology. Media artists working in this area point out the direct connection between an increasing world population, the consumerism and patterns of energy use linked to this (which in their turn are connected to the daily use of technology) and the exhaustion of our natural resources. Based on techno-ecological assumptions, the Symbiotica artists and researchers from Australia experiment with cultivated meat at culinary art-events. With this they try to give an answer to, from an environmental perspective, an uncontrollable meat consumption.

Ownership

Why are media art experiments so important when we talk about art in the public space? The media influence our behaviour, while we ourselves are inextricably linked to it. Experiments by media artists take us along in their critical and artistic media and technology experience, and with this let us look with different eyes at our (semi) public reality and experience this in a different way. Renee Boomkens gives a striking illustration of the point I’m trying to make when he writes: ‘(…) the meaning of new technology depends to a great extent on the way in which users of this technology take ‘ownership’ of it. But it is precisely in this ownership that the user of this new technology transforms his or her own reality.’

In the past decades artists have developed tools for this ownership. For example, right after the introduction of a public internet in the Netherlands, many artists experimented with the blurring boundary between private and public, in which they did not shy away from fraught issues such as trust and ethical matters. In 1995 a group of artists called De Netband raised a number of ethical issues with their project ‘Het Ei van het Internet’ (‘The Egg of the Internet’), such as the relationship between nature and technology and living in a hybrid environment. The egg, which was hatched out by an incubator, was
attended to by the online community. Visitors became responsible for the hatching out of the egg through the technology and for the care and feeding of the chick and (later) the chicken.

Now the internet, which once became popular as a medium ‘for everyone’, is increasingly dominated by commercial parties such as Google and Facebook, media researchers are also investigating the use of private information in the new (semi) public space. The ‘track and trace’ which used to be only relevant for checking the location of our sent or ordered packages, is used more and more to register our offline and online (trans)actions, another recurring subject for media artist. In other words, by pushing and pulling media art is continually researching the boundaries, transparency and accessibility of the ‘public information space’.

Hybrid reality
But let’s return to Boomkens for a moment. He registers that a functionalist approach to the city and its public spaces should make way for a culturalist perspective, in which active participation by the modern ‘world citizen’ is essential. Boomkens argues that urban spaces should first of all be understood as stages for the modern experience-economy and should be furnished based on this notion. From his perspective urbanity is no longer seen as a spatial organisation process, but understood from experience. The use, the experiences of the inhabitants give shape to the urban public space. To this can be added a fourth dimension: media reality. The urban space then is a hybrid public space, shaped by urbanites, in which a physical and a mediatised reality intermingle. Media art often works with non-functionalist perspectives, which break through obvious behaviour patterns in the form of artistic interventions or infiltrations. This can be confusing (and refreshing) in our hybrid reality – and of course this is completely intentional. Take the Serendipitor app by Mark Shepard: a navigation system which combines serendipity as an ‘accidental’ course decider with the new habit of navigating by mobile phone. The Serendipitor offers alternative – and certainly not the quickest – routes to someone’s destination. On the way there the traveller is surprised and is more attentive to his environment. Experiments such as these deregulate the participant/user and in this way contribute to an increasing awareness concerning our lives in the ‘new’ public space. These experience-experiments differentiate artistic research from academic or functional technical research. This experience knowledge from media art, which is based on practice, can be used very effectively in design and innovation processes. I therefore propose to let media artists participate in design teams: their expertise is relevant for urban, technological and social innovation. In this way the subjective and refreshing perspective of media art can be added to the expertise of a design team. In the same way (interactive) sculptures are the icing on the cake, media artists can take on the role of refreshing superchargers right at the start of a project or even before the project starts.

Two roles
In addition to innovation of popular culture through innovative art, I can see two real new roles for media artists and researchers. On the one hand they can give, with their input, an impulse to the social debate concerning social-societal changes which come with hyperreality. On the other hand the media art perspective in the design phase of technology and urban renewal can be a refreshing, interactive supercharger for the design of our experiences in hyperreality. In both roles the participant, the citizen, is actively involved in the renewal or innovation process. This provides, in addition to
committed participants, new insights into the perception and interaction patterns in a mixed public space. Think for example of media art as an enriching experience based on virtual reality in the physical public space. This way a new, virtual layer of social interactions is created in the physical space. The experience of a public space can then really become a layered experience of this hyperreality.

In earlier publications I made a plea for the supercharger role of artists as experimental researchers, and with this I would like to reaffirm this plea. Facilitating a media artist as a supercharger of innovation processes may grow into a very interesting task for centres of fine arts, especially in areas where the government and businesses are seriously investing in new technology. Media art as I have discussed in this essay, can greatly increase the quality of explorations of new technology, both in the city and in the country. This media art may not meet traditional expectations of ‘art in public spaces’, but our concept about this is subject to change, in the same way that everything in the world is continually changing.

4 The Next 5 Minutes: http://www.next5minutes.org
8 http://www.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au/
11 http://serendipitor.net/site/