Media References – Knowledge Networks in Experimental Arts

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My ideas on the topic of media art and self-reference emerged from my research on strategies of analogue media art practices and their parallels with structures and approaches in today's new media art field. My research materials from Moscow, Russia, and Riga, Latvia, (early 1980s) included some examples of samizdat publications – texts and tape recordings. Among the works were a poetic absurdist novel [1] and a re-published documentation and discussion of collective performative actions. [2] Both editions were typed or recorded and transcribed in a collaborative effort by a group of people, manually copied, and distributed (or intended for distribution) as *samizdat*, hand to hand. I also discovered examples of collaborative creative practices of documentation and reflection on the margins of the Western art canon – *12 dialogues, 1962–1963* [3], featuring dialogues by Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton dedicated to their own fellow artists' practice, and *Filmmakers* by Takahiko Iimura (1966 / 69), which portrays the experimental filmmakers scene in the U.S. I think that some features of these collaborative creative experiments are similar to characteristics of new media and indie publishing and can also be traced in the growing participatory culture and collaborative writing practice emerging in wikis and blogs. In the following, I will try to sketch out some of these parallels, although I have not yet arrived at a comprehensive, elaborate summary of them. The topic raised several questions about the self-definition of experimental arts practices; the references that provide historical and contemporary context for these initiatives; their methods of discussion and documentation, and the role of media in this process. In a discussion of collective work, it is interesting to see what effect locality has on the scene, at what point practices become adopted in a wider social context, and how the autonomy of these practices is defined. I see these sets of questions not so much as institutional but as organizational.

Self-reference can be understood as one of the features of discursive practices related to media. However, over the last few years the use of the term in connection with media art has been mostly dismissive, describing formal and hermetic properties of the work, practice, or scene rather than a set of approaches to communication, discussions, and documentation that compose a historical narrative. In his article "Mapping the limits of new media" [4], Geert Lovink writes, "What in positive terms could be described as the heroic fight for the establishment of the self-referential new media arts system through a frantic differentiation of works, concepts and

traditions may as well be classified as a dead-end street." The authors' critical comment is directed at the art institutions that presumably fail to participate in the process of redefining the roles and strategies of tactical media and media art in the post 9/11 environment of informational fatigue and disillusionment: "The majority of the new media organizations such as ZKM, the Ars Electronica Centre, ISEA, ICC or ACMI are hopeless in their techno innocence, being neither critical nor radically utopian in their approach." Importantly, these comments stress the link between self-reference and the establishment of an institutional structure. However, they also raise the question whether one can expect a radically utopian approach from the "systems" of institutional bodies that are expected to ensure continuity and establish and represent – i.e. filter – practices in the field. Instead one could focus on informal networks and initiatives within which the experimental approaches have been originally created, tested, distributed, and developed. The practices of involvement, information sharing, reviewing, and documenting have been crucial in shaping the history of experimental art movements as it is known now. Still, what are the conditions that would allow to revive the theme of self-reference?

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Twin Languages – Methods and Messages

It may be appropriate to take a look back at the analogue samizdat practices of the 70s and 80s. These examples of creative writing have resulted in the invention or creative appropriation of new formal structures – intentional typos, subjective grammar amendments,

abbreviations, compositional shifts between poetry, interview, and real or fictional dialogue and text. One could also speak about the "invention" of a new language – new terminology within these structures. As an example or result of such a process of "invention of language," I could mention the *Glossary of the terms of Moscow Conceptualist School* [5], which was published as a summary of "words and expressions" created by this school; another example would be publications by Riga artists who invaded the mass media, which ended up discussing the terms invented and appropriated by them, and provided informational background on their activities. It is important to mention that most of these new metaphors and verbal structures were intended to describe an approach, to name a new mode of or guideline for action / perception within a cultural context.

The form of the collective glossary or vocabulary – an explanation of certain terms applied in the field – already is a symptomatic structure of the collaborative discourses related to both analogue and digital media. The process of "explanation" and redefining strategies is a constituent of the scene. I remember including a glossary of specific terms and concepts adopted by the new media scene in an article about new media developments in Riga, Latvia. Since then, I have been noticing similar explanations of glocal terminology and "manufacturing concepts" [6] in other publications devoted to media art. One could add a historical perspective by mentioning the vocabularies and redefinitions brought into the art field by the Situationist International, Dada, or Surrealism. New vocabularies are discursive and indicate an intention (or ambition) to link creative, and perhaps partly invented, language to recognized knowledge systems, such as academic writing.

Different tools of expression produce different structures of discourse, for example, hierarchical, instrumental, or non-hierarchical and collaborative. 0ne example of this type of framing within textual culture – by integrating issues of authorship, participation, and control of information distribution – can be found in the comparison between the popular but historically young genre of the interview [7] and the classical, seemingly obsolete, tradition of the dialogue. Despite "delegating" part of the speech act, interviews are still culturally affirmative of the figure of the author and of the power of editing and often imply contention or hierarchy between the interviewer and interviewee. As an instrument of mass media, the interview assumes a mediated one-way information flow. In contrast, dialogue or conversation (etymologically: flowing through the meaning; to converse through) presupposes equal or close to equal roles within the exchange. One could speculate that an interview presupposes a certain translation while dialogue is based on the possibility of communicating on a comparable level of language and argumentation.

This reveals two connected layers that form media-based languages, one being discourse or content, the other being the method of mediation, which, when used for creative purposes, undergoes similar revisions as narrative or argumentation. This argument relates to Friedrich Kittler's definition of "Discourse Networks." In his book *Discourse Networks* 1800-1900 (the original German title being *Aufschreibesysteme*, "notation systems" in a literal translation), he defines the discourse network as "the network of the techniques and institutions that provide a certain culture with the possibility of addressing, saving, and processing of the relevant data." [8] In another essay he remarks, "At best one differentiates between language, on the one hand, and technology, on the other, between communicative and instrumental action, as European writing would prove that there is no communication without the message technology." [9] I do not see discourse as being subordinated to technology, but rather understand the two as interrelated parts forming a narrative and affecting its reading, as twin languages.

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The emergence of technological tools does not only structurally affect narratives; it repositions the powers of and reshapes the relations between the inventor, user, and distributor. Even if we avoid moral judgements, technology cannot be understood as neutral, since it conditions its usage and its underlying social relations. The language of applications can be analyzed in a similar way as the vocabulary used in theoretical propositions. Not only the text itself but also its structure and distribution are inscribed with an agenda. From this point of view, it is interesting to analyze not only the forms and ambitions of Manifestos of avant-garde artists, but also the declaration and distribution methods of different copyright policies. The emphasis is shifted from structural data hierarchies within media (such as hypertext or database) to the hierarchies stablished by models of access.

In recent (July 2006) posts on Nettime – an e-mail list of

"international, networked discourse" – one could follow a debate that started with the posting of a report on the "Nettime_North_America gathering." The ensuing argument that was soon described as "generationalist" [10], i.e. unfolding between an "older" generation of people from the "tactical media" field and founders of Nettime, and a "younger" generation, some of which were so-called "lurkers" (subscribers reading posts without posting themselves). The latter group posed a set of questions regarding the general openness of majordomo mailinglists; exclusive standards of "highbrow theory" in postings on the list; and the legitimation of authority within the self-organized mailling list system, condensed in the question, "Who owns Nettime?" What resulted was a rather orthodox revolutionary tension between the "will for change" among the initiators of the discussion and the "impossibility of change" within the current mailinglist structure, which many (including myself) still recognize as a valuable form of media with "the status of a book." The discussion on several occasions positioned Nettime in opposition to the fragmented Blogosphere; at the conclusion of the debate, a group of people started to engage in developing "web-based applications that could be developed alongside email-based communication" and started a wiki.

The discussion showed that the mailinglist model has to some extent failed in its promise to provide a participatory structure and has now been relegated to the position of "older" media, leaving the arena open to new challengers – structures such as blogs and wikis. The debate also disclosed the difficulties of reconciling the current discourse on the list, being closer to that of a book, with the different discussion format that would be brought about by a formal upgrade through the use of more current technologies. In addition, an upgrade of the list seemed to have its "social" limits, as there apparently was little enthusiasm among the subscribers to take on the role of moderators. This conflicting situation perhaps illustrates the gap between a certain form of discourse and the "aging" tools for its distribution – visions of possible models for a more balanced content distribution in the end relied on the same wiki applications that were previously criticized on the list.

Licenses for new technological solutions and tools have only recently been created or are still in the process of being developed and adopted. In the current development of participatory technologies and social software, the freedoms of their use are compared to the freedoms we have enjoyed in verbal or written languages. The terminology surrounding Web 2.0 – such as "semantic web" or "taxonomy" – or even the encyclopaedic build-up of the Wikipedia are strongly linked to basic concepts of linguistics, which provide the support for an analogy between freedom of speech and "freedom to use, study, copy, modify, and redistribute computer software, and to defend the rights of Free Software users." [11]

Mnemotechniques, Solidarity, and Localization

The history and theory of experimental practices has traditionally been explored and shaped predominantly by the artists and activists working in the field. Technological solutions in the arts are often linked to technological conditioning, the influence of the commercial industries, and consumer culture. However, it is difficult to find industries that engage with the broader context of the field; the spectrum of engagement remains limited, in a rather modernist sense, to pragmatics, policies of brand protection, and the industries' perceived need to distance themselves from what might be seen as unappealing aspects, such as the military history and context of media, experiments in arts and science or their wider cultural impact. An exploration of the field of history – not limited by scientific or political agendas – has been left largely to individual efforts in creating social platforms for public discussion; to individual contributions by people working on "discourse archaeology."

Michel Foucault has been writing about the condition of "ties between care of the self and lack of education." [12] The field of media art is "generational" – generations of inventors, users, and artists are distanced from each other not so much by time spans but, despite interdisciplinarity, by the "age-specificity" of the media in which they work (video art, experimental film, text art, computer art, net art), and there are few bridges crossing these gaps. Yet these differences and gaps probably prevented the emergence of a homogenous, consensual history of the field. Artists have often been pioneers in establishing subjective interdisciplinary links between the histories of sciences, humanities, and arts, treating these domains as fields of reference open to variation and reinterpretation. Technological gaps are bridged through discourse – through experimental investigations in the history of the respective field and through discussing rediscovered references. This might be the reason why a generational gap is less noticeable in independent broadcast media, which tend to operate on the assumption of a utopian axis of convergent distribution channels with a "universal reach." Autonomous histories in experimental arts are close to the project of academia, which produces a frequent fusion of these fields. The genealogy of technology is tied to the creative and social ideas behind it.

In his book *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty – taking a rather postmodern stance towards the definition of self and knowledge production – explores possibilities of reconciling the "private" concept of self-creation with his vision of solidarity and utopian liberalism and points to the contingency of language. Referring to philosophies of language – Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson – he argues that we have to abandon the idea of discovering universal knowledge since knowledge is continuously being created in a contingent process of the invention of new vocabularies that affect

both selfhood and society. "The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generations to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of non-linguistic behaviour." [13] Recognition of the "contingency of language" is seen as an indicator of a general turn from theory to narrative. "Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other. […] This is the task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially the novel." Rorty elaborates on this through a variety of references, among them Nietzsche's description of "truth" as a "mobile army of metaphors;" he refers to the role of the poet as that of an inventor of vocabulary and introduces the figure of the historic, contingency-aware "liberal ironist" who reconciles a private awareness of the contingency of language with social empathy. For Rorty, writing in the form of both literature and ethnography (journalism) is important for constituting a link between self-creation and solidarity; "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in e.g. novels and ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress." [14]

One could compare this proposition with a statement from the community-based "Cybermohalla" project by Sarai / Ankur:

What would be the role of an artist in the age of participatory culture? Maybe, as in the age of samizdat, not a progressive but rather an exploratory one – both samizdat and subsequent media arts were not so much concerned with the space of media as with the space "beyond" media, or possibilities of expression (and action) beyond conventional models.

Diaries have the potential to evolve newer languages that further displace dominant discourses because they are situated and personal, outside of the domain of the 'expert,' and the technocratic language, that 'expert'ese entails. Hence, Diaries can create the possibility of forms of narratives other than those that exist in mainstream narrative culture. Written across dimensions of space, time, specific contexts and subjectivities, diaries can also be seen as databases of multiple narrative strands, as a plurality of comment, observation, word-play and reflection; as adventitious micro-histories of the present. [15]

Given the new and sometimes non-linguistic mechanisms for publishing and reporting – the grassroots journalism of the Blogosphere, wikis as a collaborative tool enabling the collective creation of text and vocabularies – one might assume that we have arrived at creating conditions for this new age of "description" and for the eventual rise of solidarity. Social software applications tend to establish themselves as a global language while their content becomes more localized, individualized, community-based. Weblogs and wikis in local languages, free and open source software, locative media, folksonomy, and wifi systems have contributeda to a shift that brings the geographical peripheries back into focus. The utopian creative and social model of the mid-90s' technological "communication space" has been transformed into a pragmatic but still visionary media channel that is far more bound to physical space. There are various examples of this development – among them Wireless London [16], Île Sans Fil [17], Loca [18], or Dorkbot networks [19], which, through technologies and ad-hoc networking, appeal to real-space communities. On the other hand, initiatives that started as online experiments have grown into organizations developing projects, local language publications, and local infrastructures – RIXC [20] (Latvia), kuda.org [21] (Serbia), mi2 [22] (Croatia) or Intermundos [23] (Columbia) could be mentioned as examples. These projects involve small local networks and revise collaboration models in real space. "Global" tools are applied within the context of locality and are borrowed to realize localized, specific agendas and coin site-specific argumentation and strategies.

Discourses striving to address global conditions and solutions seem to have lost their credibility during the course of the 20th century, the last disappointment being the post-9/11 political environment. Information space is saturated with fragmented descriptions and narratives, and we now possess more efficient and egalitarian (in the computerized world) tools for their distribution and publication. But, at the same time, we can see the expansion of standardized applications and media language conventions. This tendency seems to continue the general trajectory of globalization and its international application of conventional organizational models (i.e. tools), such as copyright legislation, institutional models, software solutions, or even subculture trends.

Is this a promising picture for net culture? Maybe, if net culture will find new ways to create tactical collaboration nodes and surpass the binary Marxist model of the base and superstructure, and its associated representational attitudes. Participation is related to the models of consumer culture within existing systems; what seems to be dangerous is contempt for "participatory" aspects and

obedience with regard to established social technologies. Contentwise, "empty" applications have their bias and tend to be "filled" with political and commercial ideologies; as in the case of terminology, where dead conventions are often refilled with dull and repetitive meanings created by politics, or in the case of argumentation in the field of copyright policies.

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At this point, one could probably make a U-turn towards Francisco Varelas' distinction between the interactions of "control" and "living system." Varela distinguishes between two interaction systems: interaction through control, and interaction through autonomy. Interaction through instructions – characterized by "consumption, input and output, the definition of identity through the other" and resulting in mistakes in the case of failure – is compared to an autonomous, self-referential, autopoetic living system that represents "production, regulation and self-defined identity" and entails interaction through conversation or incomprehension (in the case of failure). [24] This raises ethical questions regarding the complexity of relations to the living system.

Maybe it is possible to propose a vision of unpredictable, productive hermeneutics that ensures the development of a "living" scene. In this context, self-reference might be an analytical and ironic power rather than a stagnant element. In the end, even "convergent" media are highly self-referential, not only on a narrative but also on a technological level – sampling, encoding, processing, browsing or reporting on media, and complementing them with links to source sites is different from writing an off-line text. Projects such as *GWEI* [25], *Human Browser* [26] or *Textz.com* can be seen as "ironic media experts" and manipulators of self-referential systems.

In philosophy, self-reference is associated with the para-

dox of inclusion, exclusion, and autonomy. To mention an example from the Wikipedia: "The Barber paradox supposes a barber who shaves everyone who does not shave himself, and no one else. When one thinks about whether the barber should shave himself or not, the paradox begins to emerge." The elimination of self-reference in new media and experimental arts would probably raise more questions than the acceptance of self-reference.

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