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Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg
Media art below the threshold of visibility

Abstract

If we define media art as video art, i.e. as large-format projections of moving analogue and digital video images, we can say that today there are only a few conflict lines left between media art and art institutions. The large-scale ephemeral video image that became possible thanks to the development of high-quality projection technologies proved to be largely compatible with art institutions which are predominantly focussing on visual presentations and projects.

However, media art is not only video art, but rather has developed into a broad range of practices over the last fifteen years, e.g. into net art or software art. Many projects explicitly do not employ an opulent visual aesthetics but are rather rough (because in many cases they are text-based), minimal, and are only accessible when activated through the activities of a user. Furthermore, they require a certain level of media literacy, i.e. a basic knowledge of the technical environment (Internet, software) they are based in and they are addressing.

Current media artistic practices are in many instances process-oriented and thus correspond to the radically expanded notion of art (known since the 1960s). They take place and develop in a heterogenous field – underneath the water surface, to stick to the iceberg metaphor - between art and culture, politics, economy and society. Often they consist of concepts for artistic and/or political interventions creatively putting into question our current situation that is, as we all know, significantly constituted through media.

In the lecture I will talk about some exemplary new structures of distribution and contextualisation that have developed in the field of net and software art – beyond institutions and media art festivals (runme.org, Readme conference series). In so far as art institutions see themselves not only as museums, but as platforms enabling the shaping of the things to come, they can only do justice to this expanded media cultural field by opening up for production, various discourses and co-operations beyond the art context.

In my lecture I will also talk about the growing discontent with the notion of media art (which is connected with the developments – the growing institutional acceptance - mentioned above). I will be arguing that the current uncertainty should be used in order to finally do away with a way too narrow (i.e. predominantly technical) definition of media art. What is needed, instead, is an unprejudiced and open-minded approach towards a field of practice that is largely characterized by a state of permanent change.