

The Private Life of Machines. Marcelina Wellmer's Scanned_Image (2013-2014)

The work "Scanned_Image" is a circuit of random, technical occurrences. Two scanners are scanning each other – every time in a different, random resolution and at a different point in time. Two webcams relay the scanning process to the monitor and the printer reproduces the image of the scanners' encounter. An office lamp, flickering along with the process of printing, amplifies the visual noise. The last device in the chain is a shredder – you can take the produced image with you or instantly destroy it.

At a first glance, the installation reminds of too well known office environment, with the electronic equipment performing its duties and a familiar soundscape. However, something is lacking here. It's a human being. The connected machines and devices seem to function in an independent, autonomous circuit, making the human factor obsolete. The scanners scan each other every time in an unexpected resolution, randomly generated by the program. This first step, already happening by chance, has an impact on the rhythm of the following patterns of both light and sound. Therefore, despite the endless image production, the effort that machines make will be always unfinished.

If machines, concerned as artificially intelligent, were able to have a private life, they would probably develop some sort of communication, particularly trying to overcome a language barrier between them. Nonetheless, the language both scanners use to communicate with each other, stays rather obscure for a human being. The subsequent materialization of the images brings the process of remediation to another level. Production of images results in their later petrification in a form of a painting, an object familiar to the context of art history. Nevertheless, in the age of overabundance of artificial images it seems to be more interesting to focus on the underlying structure of their making, than on their actual content. Therefore, the devices, once called peripheral, are engaged in their reciprocal communication, independently and self-sufficiently. The project seems to reach back to the very roots of computer art, yet it implies the contemporary disbelief in the utopia of communication.

The history of computer art begins with efforts to create an independent yet creative machine, like *The Zuse Graphomat Z64* (1961) - an automatic drawing machine by Konrad Zuse. Also, Ben F. Laposky or Herbert w. Franke, using analog computers to create images from an oscilloscope, were among the pioneers. There had been no artificial images of that kind before. However, the famous declaration by May Ray, who is believed to say that it had been a relief to get rid of the sticky painting matter and work directly with pure light, may establish even earlier history. Rayograms and oscillograms share a common feature – they are images created artificially, in the way Max Bense understood it in 1965, trying to explain the controversies of early computer art to academy-based artists: to differ it from the art

created by an artist as a human being¹. Half a century later, in *An Archeology of a Computer Screen* (1995) Lev Manovich described scanning, tracing its genealogy back to radar as a device aimed at capturing real-time image:

“What this means is that the image, in a traditional sense, no longer exists! And it is only by habit that we still refer to what we see on the real-time screen as “images.” It is only because the scanning is fast enough and because, sometimes, the referent remains static, that we see what looks like a static image. Yet, such an image is no longer the norm, but the exception of a more general, new kind of representation for which we don’t have a term yet”².

Another twenty years after, in the plethora of artificially produces images, we might shift our attention from searching for the relevant term, to the process of creating “computer generated pictures” itself³. The randomness as a key quality, results from a kind of “reverse engineering” tactics that Marcelina Wellmer applies for her installation⁴. Using everyday devices, the artist reaches for the ready-made aesthetical formula but also engages them in a form of a transmedial dialogue. The items on a table create a dispositive (in the sense given by Roland Barthes in his textual theory) – a context within which an artwork is created and experienced. Both visual and audio elements of this process are time-based and generative, so the conversational looping feedback is potentially endless. If negotiating meanings results from the process of communication between machines, a human observer’s role is reduced to collecting / destroying printed images.

In his pivotal text *The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems* (1970) Jack Burnham stated: “the aesthetics of intelligent systems could be considered a dialogue where two systems gather and exchange information so as to change constantly the *states of each other*”⁵. This idea, still experimental at a time when Burnham coined his theory, seems to be possible in the *Scanned_Image* installation by Marcelina Wellmer, dealing with the issues of randomness, transcoding and generative processes.

Keywords: remediation, feedback, artificial intelligence, transmedia, scanning, systems aesthetics, dispositive, randomness, reverse engineering.

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¹ See: Frieder Nake, *Roots and Randomness – a Perspective on the Beginnings of Digital Art*, in: Lieser, Wolf (ed.), *Digital Art*, Tandem Verlag, 2009, p. 46-51.

² Lev Manovich, *An Archeology of a Computer Screen*, 1995, http://manovich.net/TEXT/digital_nature.html

³ The term “Computer Generated Pictures” refers to an exhibition in the Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1965, when it was used, apparently as an euphemism, as it seemed to be too early to call these creative outputs “art”.

⁴ The term “tactics” is used here as understood by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

⁵ Jack Burnham, *The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems*, in: *On the Future of Art*, Viking Press, New York, 1970, pp. 95-122.