

# Media Pop Art – Electronic Art as Satire on Everyday Life

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I will give an outline of my practice as a young media artist and introduce some of my strategies, thoughts and works. I will try to formulate my subjective view of media culture and media art with a special focus on game art. On the basis of some illustrative works I will introduce the term Media Pop Art, and highlight the importance of socio-political aims in my works.

## Keywords

Game Art. Media Art. Pop Art. Activism. Installation. Interactivity. Socio-political Art.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with a computer was at the age of ten. This early computer (Amstrad CPC 6128) was relatively powerful for the time but not supported by many programmes or games. Thus I soon started programming my own little games and drawing programs. I was overwhelmed by the possibilities it gave me on the one hand but was often frustrated by the strict rules and difficulties writing code that would run as expected. Luckily however I grew up in the 2D era, where I was satisfied programming circles which had to shoot at boxes. The kids growing up now can choose from a myriad of games incorporating complex stories and puzzles coupled with realistic graphical representation of the real world. These kids grow up with these advanced media forms, frequently consuming them in an uncritical way. I see my role as an artist to work with the gaming media, analyze, deconstruct and reconstruct it [6]. In the next section I will write about my project (t)Error, which was my attempt to use the medium computer game to transport a protest message [7]. (t)Error is exhibited at the COSIGN 2004 Art Show. After that I will shortly review the projects Orgasmatron, StencilU and City Obscura and on the basis of these works I will try to formulate my ideas and thoughts about media culture.

## 2. (T)ERROR – A MIXED REALITY SATIRE ABOUT WORLD POLITICS AND THE GAMING INDUSTRY

Whom would you like to play to get the world back into shape? George W. Bush, Osama Bin Laden, or rather Tony Blair? Starting the computer game (t)Error, the player is spoilt for choice. A camera tracks the player's movements and a

projector throws the players outlines in original size on a white wall in front of him, all in realtime (see Figure 1).

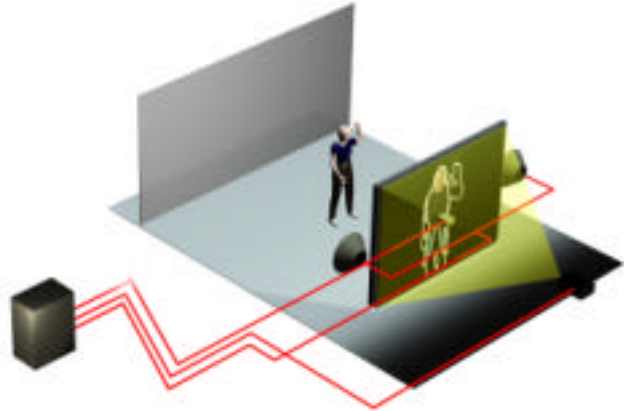


Figure 1. Schematic of the installation

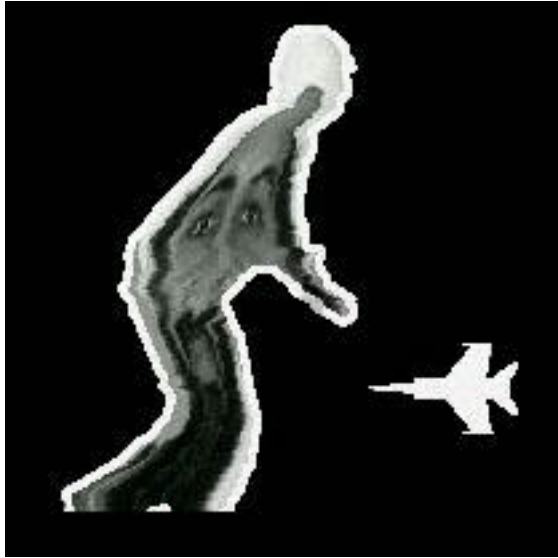
When the player kicks, his shadow will kick. When the player ducks or jumps to avoid bumping into an enemy jet, his shadowy avatar will do exactly the same in real time. The empty silhouette of the player gets filled out - and this is the player's choice - with the face of George W. Bush, the flag of a state which supported the Iraq war, or the body of Osama Bin Laden (see Figure 2,3). For gaining a good game score, you will have to fight evilly. Being slipped into this stereotype role, you have to avoid tanks, submarines and fighter planes, you have to collect oil pumps and dollar notes, and you have to kick civilians begging for help. If you succeed in all these matters, you are the lucky winner and rise to the next game level.



Figure 2. Screenshot of (t)Error

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**Figure 3. Another screenshot of (t)Error**

I always felt that at least for me there is a lack of meaning in a lot of media pieces. I decided to express my feelings about the war in Iraq with a protest computer game and tried to use this genre as a protest medium. In former times a revolution started with a song, in our time console kiddies play games, it's as easy as that. I see a transition in how information and protest works for the younger generation. Fakes, Adbusting und Semiotic Sniping are the ways to express your feelings in a world ruled by global players. The logos and signs of this companies can be found everywhere. Resistance is futile? Not if you undermine their symbolic system, fight with their weapons and use corporate disinformation. That's what I try to do with my art. I'll define this kind of work as Media Pop Art. It takes well known objects, structures, medias, etc. and sets it in a different and sometimes funny context. For me that's more interesting than to make a serious art work, which in the end doesn't reach anyone, except some specialists [6].

## 2.1 (t)Error criticizes the Iraq war

„Art is the cry of distress uttered by those who experience at first hand the fate of mankind.“ [12]

This interactive video installation was my reaction on the Afghanistan campaign and the following Iraq war. It is a political persiflage on world politics, a mixed-reality game, which playfully tempts - through the whole body interaction - to participate, but at the same time the not very playful content of (t)Error wants to provoke reflection and self-reflection.

This play with the aspects of fun and seriousness or game and reality forms the basis of my work and media analysis.

Laughter lures the visitors, and not only an elitist gallery audience, but also the people from the street, who do not know too much about contemporary art. Fun, games and interaction cause motion, it is then much easier to get involved in the game, and so the change from laughter to sadness is more powerful and obvious.

## 2.2 (t)Error criticizes the gaming industry

To transform this combination of laughing and crying into the world of computer games, and so into the world of our children, was my main aim.

“Fifty percent of all Americans age six and older play computer and video games.” [14]

„In 1998, over one in four American youngsters reported playing games between seven and 30 hours a week. More than one in four homes has a game console.” [4]

This is one of the reasons why I like to show my installation at parties and clubs or in public space (see Figure 4) [10]. This year at the beginning of april, for example, (t)Error was exhibited in Berlin, in the “Club zur Möbelfabrik”. The young audience of this venue participated with enthusiasm. The reflection hit them a couple of minutes later, when the youngsters squatted down besides the installation, tired after the exhausting movements.



**Figure 4. (t)Error as public space intervention**

“I just played Osama Bin Laden in the game. I was killing people. Was that fun?” And this is what makes the artistic examination of computer games so precious and powerful: The sudden liberation, which is triggered by the dramaturgy of computer games, the role games par excellence. Nowhere else it is as simple and as easy to slip into the role of authorities, to play with the overthrow of established social systems and experience the dynamism of action and reaction without any danger. At the same time, (t)Error provides its players with a strange closeness and directness: It's not a joystick that helps our avatars to jump hundred meters high, but everyone is actively playing him/herself.

(t)Error is an attempt to dismantle the gaming industry and the stereotype roles and behavior patterns taught by it. All these are the semiotics our children are confronted with since birth. We need to analyze them to get to know our children's world.

The simple, pixel graphics of my game was developed following early, famous computer games like for example Space Invaders or Defender.

(t)Error creates a manageable (art) space, a system of signs and symbols, which are well known by the followers of computer

games, who always associate these sign systems with fun and leisure time. Society codes and conventions which everyone takes for granted, can now be seen from a different perspective and open up new possibilities for dialogue and debate.

### 2.3 (t)Error criticizes the media society

Our contemporary life and society consist of brainwashing media flashes, consumption and pseudo-happiness paired with an upcoming depression. My work uses the same media and the same mechanisms however the goal is the deconstruction of this failed system and a reflection of this media junked fake.

Just the unbroken popularity and fascination of computer games speaks for an artistic analysis. There is a whole “culture of external activities that has developed around these games – from trading of customized game patches to demands that the manufacturer provide more levels, to whole web sites devoted to one’s avatars [3]. In consequence of her examination, Antoinette La Farge stresses that in the near future, computer games will be as important in the modern cultural landscape as art, music or film.

### 2.4 (t)Error criticizes the abuse of computer games through military and economy

Another important point of criticism shown in (t)Error lies in the close connection of computer games with military and economy.

„It’s now fairly common knowledge that Operation Desert Storm was prepped for by doing simulation strategy exercises down in Florida, and that the US military is currently pumping large amounts of capital into figuring out how to appropriate gaming principles for battle training in massively multuser SimNet environments.” [4]

This list of strange simultaneities and surprising cooperations could go on and on and on.

“According to the Interactive Digital Software Association’s 1999 sales information, over 6.1 billion dollars in U.S. entertainment software sales in 1999 went to games.” [4]

In a time where professional computer games have more production budgets as Hollywood films, you must question this media, analyze it artistically and bring it up in a topic. A whole generation grows up with games, mostly just having one goal: “You achieve your aims with violence.”

Artists and creative must click in at this point, dismantle these games, rearrange them with new ideas and reflect the media itself. The transformation and modification of games are also interesting in the historical context, if you consider that military institutions have taken a great part in the development of this gaming technology. With the second version of a modified 3D Shooter the American Army is at the present time hunting for new recruits; let’s hope that this shot was off target.

## 3. ORGASMATRON

Orgasmatron is an interactive sound installation. It is designed as a glass piano (see Figure 5) [8]. When you move your hand over a glass the vibrator next to a glass starts and generates a certain sound. All the glasses are filled with a certain amount of liquid which so build up a scale. A camera from above detects which glasses are triggered. This

installation has been exhibited at the Ars Electronica Pixelspaces Exhibition 2003.



Figure 5. Orgasmatron

I used real sex vibrators and put them in another context. It is my reaction about the floods of spam mail about sex, porn, etc. Towards a sex thrilled society, viagra, penis enlargement, porn. Sex sells it’s a simple equation. Orgasmatron is my persiflage of a culture which certainly thinks more about sex then about Mozart. I tried to promote the installation with fancy flyers and in a pop cultural way, to make it look like a clubbing, which worked very well (see Figure 7).



Figure 6. Orgasmatron Flyer



Figure 7. Anonymous with Flyer in his pocket

I printed 700 flyers and they were all gone in 4 days. I don’t think this is because people in Austria are so much into media art, it’s more about using the references and the same language as youth culture.

## 4. STENCILU

StencilU is a quite simple but powerful realtime visualization of time and personality [9]. It is an interactive installation, where your silhouette is captured with a camera (see Figure 1) and the frames of the silhouette are made smaller and arranged around the actual silhouette. The small silhouettes arranged are the different time frames. With this technique the motion of yourself floats around as small representations around your big realtime shadow (see Figure 8). Accordingly to the speed of the movements of the user the visual output is inverted, this gives a stroboscope effect, which resembles a club aesthetic and a motion blur is switch on randomly which makes the visualization even more club like.



Figure 8. First version of StencilU

The project was developed at Schmiede 04, a media gathering of vjs, djs, audio producers, coders, hacktivists, sprayers, etc., in one word young individualists who have something to say and do it with their possibilities [13].

The aesthetics in black and white look like pictures in the sprayer/stencil community and therefore I came up with the idea to photograph street art (graffiti tags and stencils) and integrate it in the project (see Figure 9). So your stencils are combined with the street art stencils, respectively icons (communist star, guns, bush, etc.) and result in the visual output.

In this project I used the language of the street and the signs which can be found out there which is for me a visual short story of contemporary youth culture, so it's a very interesting project for me and I would be interested to make it available to everyone with a web cam.



Figure 9. StencilU enhanced with street stencils

## 5. CITY OBSCURA

City Obscura is an interactive video installation which deconstructs and then reconstructs the urban space and architecture of the city of Judenburg, and was exhibited in July 2004 at the Liquid Music Media Art Festival in Judenburg, Austria [11].

A wide range of different shots of the city's architecture, people and crucial places awaits the visitor's eye. When the spectators start to move in front of the video screen, their movements get tracked and these gestures trigger a process of mingling the digital data streams of the videos itself. You can see the pixels as tiny bits and pieces of colored blobs, like a snow storm, revolving around your own shadowy figure on the video screen and following you wherever you go within the installation. The recipients can be seen as planets which have a gravitational force on the videos (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Distorted video of the city of Judenburg

When the visitor stops to move around and stands still, the whirring pixels start to compose themselves again to the video

shot the visitors have already seen before they started to walk around – but slightly changed

For example, one of the original videos shows us the view of one of the main streets of Judenburg, cars passing by, residents walking off doing their daily shopping. After the deconstruction through the gallery visitors, this video emerges again out of the chaotic data streams – but now the river of Judenburg – the Mur – is running through this main street, water instead of asphalt. A new utopia of Judenburg has developed.

So this points out quite obviously that we only worked with footage we found in and around the city of Judenburg. This was one of the main goals we had to achieve to stress one central thought concerning urban architecture: It is always the residents who create the architecture they are using daily. But there are not too many people who realize the important role they play in generating the infrastructure and atmosphere they are living in and what they can do themselves to make it either better or more functional or worse. This installation attempts to allow people to play with their own surroundings, and this process should lead to a critical consideration of their home town's images and to a reflection of the good and bad parts of the place they are living in. The installation also emphasizes that there is always more than one possibility to design urban space. Architecture grows through the interactivity of its residents - so the real process in everyday life is analogue to the way the installation works. The mixing of the video's digital data streams has its equivalence in the "Brownian motion". – The more movements are generated, the more the particles begin to chaotically move. This principle of chaos and order builds the basis of City Obscura. The Second Law of Thermodynamics can be seen as a consequence of probabilities, which is our metaphor for our work. After deconstruction and reconstruction a new, a different structure arises (see Figure 11).



**Figure 11. Melting the video material through movement**

On the residents of Judenburg, this installation had a very subtle impact as they knew both, the original video of course, but also the new parts of the altered one, and so they saw different parts of their home landscape in a flawless, but newly changed entity, according to the principle of déjà vu. Out of this déjà vu-effect, the artists create a new consciousness of the city in the heads of their spectators and support a critical occupation with something, that was, before, taken for granted and which was, until now, seen as something

well-known and established and unchangeable. The main aim of City Obscura is so to show a city – and this can be any city – in its flexibility and mobility. Stand-still means there is no chance to change and no possibility to alter the future. And this installation tries to show us – with its particular interactivity mode – that it is us, the residents, who can feel free, and who have the power, to alter the infrastructure we have to deal with daily, but also to get a different perspective on things we perhaps don't appreciate anymore as we see them day by day.

City Obscura was a more subtle work because the people the piece was intended for were not really into media art. But for us it was clear that the work did its job, when my collaborator Reinhold argued with an 65 year old lady about computer-based art and she thought that she is too old too understand it and there is no meaning and suddenly she saw the city, she has seen so often, differently, and then she was quiet, looked to us and said that she now is able to understand the work, which was one of the best compliments I ever got for a work.

## **6. MEDIA POP ART - A WAY OF CREATING SOCIO-POLITICAL ART**

As the works above show, I try to use the signs and the language of pop culture and everyday's life. I believe that with this way, I am able to reach more people and so my works are more likely to have an impact on society.

“Joseph Beuys is perhaps the best post-1960s example of an artist whose work changed society. Rather than adopting a perception of art that is formal and aesthetic only, his concept of social sculpture includes the kind of human action that is directed at structuring and shaping society - Beuys calls it the social organism. When seen in this way, art is not just a material artifact: it is also, and above all, action designed to have social consequences. Beuys' idea of relating plastic creativity to socio-political activities took up the social utopias of the historical avant-garde. Beuys was not primarily interested in including and using media in this context, but many post-1960s artists have both addressed media explicitly, and also used them to pursue concrete socio-political aims. They start by assuming that in a society increasingly influenced by media, an (artistic) change of media content or media structures can contribute significantly to democratizing society. And ultimately, behind this idea there lies the hope that art can change society.” [1].

Guy Debord among others formulated a radical social critique and also a radical critique of media society. It rejected creating aesthetic objects in favor of socially constructing situations aimed not at art but at life.” [1]

“The demand not to limit oneself to producing works of art any more, but to raise artistic practice to the level of the technological possibilities offered by modern industrial societies.” [5] This demand of Guy Debord is met by modern Computer Based Art. My demand though is that the produced art should use the technology and media with a sensible understanding of how to reach people and provoke the reactions you intended. “Form follows function” is not only the famous Bauhaus motto, in my work it is a credo as well. If I want to communicate something to kids, I will use their medium the computer game.

“As a rule, media installations work as a link between a (media) view of the public sphere and a subjective view of the world.” [2]

## 7. CONCLUSION

Media Pop Art has some advantages and some drawbacks. One of the benefits for young artists is that you can reach a lot of people with even a simple piece, but for that it must be easy ascertainable. There the drawback arises, that curators and media theorists critic this kind of work whether as immature or not subtle enough.

Another advantage what makes this kind of work so tempting for me is that you recycle your own or other works and make different variations with the same piece, get it a new meaning or looking [9]. Media Art is connected with a lot of work, at least if you belong to the group who is programming their art themselves. Each piece takes you a long time planning, programming, tuning, etc., so it's quite reasonable to recycle the algorithms you've already created and vary the content.

For me there is just no other option to make my art and get some attention for it. Most of the museums are far too conservative to commission computer based art [2] so as a young unknown media artist you have to draw some attention on you and your work, by embedding it in the pop cultural context. Another important point is that I grew up with pop culture and I try to reflect the media and the culture behind it with my works, so therefore my pieces often can be interpreted as media or social critique.

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