C@C – Computer Aided Curating (1993-1995) revisited

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The beginning of the Nineties was a period of transformation. As a result of the collapse of communism, the increasingly global markets and the rapid development of new technologies, numerous questions, answers and contradictions started to take shape.

The issue that interested me most was the drastic change in conditions of artistic practice. Would the increasing mobility and affordability of technological means alter the themes and aesthetics of artists? If a new economy based on immaterial processes of exchange, accessibility and production-on-demand was emerging, would there be a new definition of value in favour of ideas rather than objects? And if for the creation of art neither a studio, nor an institutional framework was needed any longer – could the artist become truly independent?

With these and other questions in mind, myself (a twenty-two years old student of Valie Export at the time) – and the young computer geek Thomax Kaulmann - started to design 'C@C' - Computer Aided Curating'. 'C@C' was a prototype system concerned with the production, presentation, documentation and distribution of contemporary art. In 1993 the World Wide Web was in its infancy and seemed just the ideal platform for our ideas.

The core of the 'C@C' program was the so called "C@C'-Navigator'. It was a minimalist interface which was organized as a tree structure and could be navigated through by the simple use of buttons. Each branch would lead to another artist. In this way visitors were able to experience a social network of artists. With 'C@C', artists both created a piece of art and actively developed the context for their work by curating up to three artists of their choice. This way the act of selecting an artist was turned from the authoritarian gesture of a single person into a more transparent effort made by all.

Artists and artists groups developing special projects with 'C@C' included Agentur Bilwet, Nina Fischer, Maroan El Sani, Pit Schultz and Mark Tribe, to name a few.

One of the pieces was made by the Viennese artist Christine Meierhofer. In 'Order a Theft' Meierhofer presented a selection of masterpieces stolen from public collections.

Meierhofer invited collectors to commission exact replicas of stolen works of art by Botticelli, Friedrich and others to fit within their private home through photographic montage. 'Order a Theft' reinstated the value of the daily practice of sampling – i.e. the use of appropriated material. At the same time her work also referred to the heated discussions about the relationship between the public and the private domain.

In order to make it easier for artists to handle the new medium, 'C@C' provided each participating artist with a password-protected editing system. This offer mirrored my wish to bridge the gap between so called media or software artists and artists that might not be working in electronic media, but nevertheless could make a valuable contribution to 'C@C'.

The so called 'Artist menu' contained automated tools for creating digital artworks without any knowledge of programming.

Our greatest pride was the SFTT – the Simple File Transfer Tool programmed by Thomax Kaulmann. Today PHP systems and other means for multipart uploading of files can often be found on the web, but at the time such a tool didn't exist anywhere else. The SFTT is a good example of long list of inventions made by artists long before consumer technology provided similar functions.

Other tools supported the making of new pages, the creation of links, the copying and deletion of files, the curating of artists etc. The 'Artist menu' was also a statement towards demystifying technology. In networking subcultures programming has been cultivated as some kind of secret knowledge, and a libidinally-loaded energy related to software often tended to replace the fetishism for physical art objects.

Pit Schultz's 'orgasmotron project' for example played with this tension between technological and erotic euphoria. For his paradoxical archive Schultz used quasi-scientific methods to measure brainwaves during orgasm that were digitally registered by means of a specific machine. Each of these registered orgasm brainwaves could be connected by the

viewer, or perceived as electronic smog, using two different interface models with the beautiful names of 'Eros' and 'Agape', offered in his 'love store'.

Other 'C@C'-features were the 'Public Discussion Area' and the so called 'Business Class'. Visitors had the opportunity to take an active part by directly commenting on single works, participating in the ongoing discourse, getting in touch with artists and acquiring a piece. The mechanism for online purchase was enabled by direct links from the collector's own website to the 'Start page' site of the artist located in 'C@C' and vice versa. By offering this service we endeavoured to stimulate public discussion and experimentation around the commercial potentials - and difficulties – of media based art.

In order to be visible in the world of contemporary art, where at the time hardly anybody had access to the Web, 'C@C' was presented in a gallery exhibition at Eigen + Art in Berlin, the Frankfurt Art Fair, Ars Electronica festival in Linz, international exhibitions, like the 'Cosmos' show at Le Magasin in Grenoble, as well as lectures and workshops in universities and art centres, such as Central St. Martins College of Art and Design or Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. The Kunst-Werke also provided us with a studio, an ISDN line, a PC etc. Public 'C@C'-screens hosted by Kunst-Werke, The Cologne Kunstverein and the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart were in preparation.

We also used old media to spread the word about 'C@C', published leaflets, inserts and articles in art magazines, which we then – alongside other print, TV and radio reports on 'C@C' – fed back into the system for documentation.

After two very intense years of developing the program, organizing the funding, supporting the artists in the process of making their contributions, and promoting 'C@C' and its artists, it became clear that my idea to kick off a snowball-system, that would then be taken further by all participants, didn't work out.

Even for computer literates it was more than challenging to make a piece with 'C@C'. Our 'Artist menu' couldn't change the fact that the whole process from developing an idea, getting a computer with a modem, installing the software, acquiring the skills, and making

the piece overwhelmed the artists. Not to mention inviting three more artists and guiding them through the same process.

Group dynamics were another issue. I learned that sub-culture and avantgarde self-organization can produce similar tactics and power struggles as known from the institutional or mainstream structures that they wanted to overcome in the first place.

Since 'C@C' was an artistic experiment and considering that I neither wanted to become a kind of meta-curator nor start a business in the mediation of web-based art, I decided to stop feeling responsible for and began work on new projects. From that moment onwards 'C@C' discontinued to grow and it finally ceased to exist when the art server 'Internationale Stadt', which hosted 'C@C', went offline.

Looking back on my experiences with 'C@C', I would like to make the following remarks:

Artists often embrace new technologies as a thing for which they can invent something, instead of the other way around. They tend to fool themselves by the seemingly limitless possibilities of new techniques, instead of focussing on the results, which are often embarrassing.

Taken too seriously, the immaterial qualities of a medium also produce yet another alienation from the living environment, generating only another type of aura, but not a gesture of criticality in itself.

The immaterialisation and flexibility of work neither created autonomous artists, nor independent curators. Unwillingly, artists and curators provided the avant-garde for a neo-liberal lifestyle, which pretends to free capitalism from the curse of oppression and bureaucratic routine, but only introduces more subtle regimes of power, which are not organized as pyramids, but as net- works.

Today, the art system operates with 'the strength of weak ties'. Reduced to the function of trend-scouts, curators have to work themselves from short term project to short term project, from jetlag to jetlag, from biennial to biennial, without enough time for research and

the development of a thorough personal agenda. Artists equally have to adapt to this new pace whereby the notion of self-realization is transformed into self-economisation. Thus, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain artistic integrity and at the same time achieve commercial success. Artistic practice becomes bound to seasonal criteria of novelty, hipness and style.

Despite the predominance of immaterial means of communication and production the rules of the market remained the same and it is still the medium of the exhibition, which is forming the main platform for contemporary art. In museums, software art is mostly only presented on the institution's website, if anywhere at all. The decision to fragment art into object-based art, which is presented in an exhibition space, as opposed to immaterial art, which should be contained within the format of the website – gives a clear indication on its valuation. It mirrors the institution's own domination by trustees, who unfortunately do not collect this kind of art.

To the benefit of all, curators should be sparring partners, long-time supporters and mediators of the artists rather than networking for the sake of networking. Independent curators can also develop a flexible but vigilant approach to art preservation instead of evaporating into an a historic virtual reality. If they use their peripatetic activity and information access to strengthen the institutional and economic weaknesses of immaterial art, they can help to both reintroduce and thus preserve it.

Artists should use whatever medium they need to make their statement on the world of today. They should also be able to claim the freedom and utmost luxury for themselves to close their studio doors behind them, disconnected.

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