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Book Review

Sanneke Huisman, Margavan Mechelen (ed.), Mind Design, Niels Schrader, Martijn de Heer (graphic designers), *A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands. Platforms, Policies, Technologies*, Jap Sam Books, 2019, 367 pp., ISBN: 978-94-92852-14-4

Significantly, the multi-layered publication *A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands: Platforms, Policies, Technologies* sets as its starting point the year 1985. In November of that year David Garcia, Raúl Marroquín et al. realized the legendary “Talking Back to the Media” (“TBTTM”) festival in Amsterdam.¹ The book takes up precisely those “platforms” – galleries and off-spaces, theatres, public and telematic space – which are particularly important to the editors alongside policies and changes in media technology. Accordingly, editors Sanneke Huisman and Marga van Mechelen explain: “The event uses and responds to the Amsterdam cable network. It also includes street posters, radio broadcasts, film nights, debates, lectures and exhibitions in the medium and small-sized venues in Amsterdam” (p. 65, Part I). Angela M. Bartholomew describes the artistic contributions to “TBTTM” and their effect when writing about *Television’s Feedback Loop: Talking Back to the Media (1985) and the Stedelijk Museum on TV* (Part IV.1), while Sven Lütticken highlights historical contexts in *Talking Back and Looking Ahead: Talking Back to the Media and Genealogies of Critical Media Art* (Part VI.3). In doing so, he looks beyond the Netherlands.

By occupying and playing with public social fields, “TBTTM” not only anticipated what Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Part VI.2) formulate as a strategic question of net art: “How can user-generated content transcend the individualized level of the remixing citizen who reappropriates culture, and how can we make sense of it as a co-created but still coherent artwork?” (ibid. p. 337) But it also shows the tension between the public and the private, which Sandra Fauconnier establishes in a media archaeological manner when focusing on the surface of mobile devices in *Between the Cracks: Art for Personal Digital Screens in the Netherlands* (Part IV.4).

¹ The festival was organized by the group of the same name, *Artists Talking Back to the Media*, which included Raul Marroquin, David Garcia, Rob Perée, Max Bruinsma, Ulises Carrion, Aart van Barneveld, Sabrina Kamstra and Sebastian Lopez (see <https://www.li-ma.nl/liima/news/artists-talking-back-media-1985-2015>).

With 1985 and “TBTM”, *A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands* alludes to the fruitful interplay between personal artistic commitment, institutional early adopters and the structure and culture of state funding. Often described as specific to the Netherlands of that time, Josephine Bosma echoes this phenomena when commenting on Constant Dullaart’s much later net-artistic activities by stating: “Like pirate media have done through their radical accessibility, art funding makes room for a freedom of creation and experimentation that, especially in combination with the Internet, allows for a near anti-institutional attitude” (p. 253, Part VI.1).² Even if the changing nature of funding policy has led to the rise and fall of various institutions and festivals that exhibit, produce or preserve media art (cf. Part I and Part II), the carefully-researched contributions in the anthology show that the Netherlands has become the meeting place and hub of a broadly networked and international community at very different levels during this period: “a vivid counter-cultural environment and a cosmopolitan artistic and intellectual scene, [in which] the Netherlands hold a unique position in regards to the development of media art” (Editors Statement).³

The extensive spectrum ranges from (early) video art (Marga van Mechelen Part III.1, Suzanne Wallinga Part III.2, Domeniek Ruyter Part III.3) to computer graphics (Darko Fritz Part II.1), and from CD-ROMs and (interactive) computer games, from computer-based to net art forms (Josephine Bosma Part IV.2). It considers object-based single-channel works as well as complex installations, performances, collaborative settings and interventions in (semi-)public spaces, which continually soften or shift the boundaries of art. While Marina Turco specifically emphasizes the *hovering* of VJing cultures (Part V.2) on the border to mass culture, Martijn van Boven with *Live Cinema* (Part V.3) catches the expansionist tendency and leads it back to more artistically connoted fields. Furthermore, scientific settings from the context of artistic research in the broader sense find their place, as Arie Altena illustrates in his own way with *Research in Technological Art at V2_* (Part II.4), David Garcia with *The Strange Persistence of Tactical Media* (Part IV.2) and Anne Nigten with *Robotics in a Technology-Based Society* (Part V.1). All these contributions lead into a “Now” that reaches up to the present day of publication (in 2018) and is written from a contemporary point of view.

What the editors’ essay alludes to when it briefly and systematically introduces the rich types of artistic articulation and players is then continued in the other texts: although they focus on their own specific themes, they also highlight points of contact with their surroundings, as in the contributions to important institutions such as STEIM (*Evolution Towards a Network Lab*, Dick Rijken, Part II.2), the V2_ (see above), the *Sonic Acts and the Changing Role of Festivals* (Arie Altena, Lucas van der Velden, Part II.5). Staying with the institutions, the changing establishments and alliances are to be mentioned that have been involved in the preservation of media art

² Funding policy is also addressed in an interview with Melanie Bühler (*Lucky to be part of it*, 316–25, Part VI.1), which she conducted with Katja Novitskova, Jan Robert Leege and Karen Archey, and was later enriched with Dullaart’s comments.

³ Sanneke Huisman, Marga van Mechelen, Blurp.

since December 1992, at that time in MonteVideo / TBA (Time Based Arts, Amsterdam), as Gaby Wijers (Part II.3) precisely explains.

A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands contains many illustrations that document both individual works and their embedding in exhibition contexts. Thus, this publication functions as a compendium, which as a whole fulfills clear documentary requirements and is extraordinarily valuable for artistic, scientific and possibly even strategic interests (e.g. regarding funding and its benefits). Works, exhibitions and (institutional) contexts are sometimes named systematically in a dense sequence and references are touched upon without being subject to interpretation. The discipline of brevity, the structural design in six parts and the balance of many different ways of looking at things make it easy to forget the closed nature of the printed book. Rather, the anthology becomes a thoroughly and critically commented reference work which, while offering a wide range of suggestions for further research and investigation, first collects facts and contextualizes them and thus secures them for the future. The anthology thus does exactly what the title promises: it spans light-footedly but on a highly qualitative level.