

9.3.3 DEVELOPING, PRESENTING, AND DOCUMENTING UNSTABLE MEDIA AT V2_¹⁹

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Unstable Media

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The origins of V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media go back to 1981, to the founding of an artist initiative in a squat in the Dutch city 's Hertogenbosch. During the 1980s their focus shifted to electronics, robotics, and the use of media and computers, and V2_ became a center for art and media technology. In 1987 V2_ issued the *Manifesto for the Unstable Media*. It was written out of dissatisfaction with the art world and its unwillingness or inability to take on new technologies. Since then, V2_ has taken up the name Institute for the Unstable Media, and has used the term 'unstable media' for the field it is covering.²⁰

In the *Manifesto*, unstable media are defined as all media that “use streams of electricity and frequencies,” and it states: “Instability is inherent to these media.” Though the original manifesto is now a historical document, it still serves as an inspiration. V2_'s current mission statement contains not only a reference to unstable media, it still states that instability is a creative force that is essential to the continuous reordering of social, cultural, political, and economic relations in society.

V2_ organises events, exhibitions, lectures, and festivals. V2_ also helps artists to develop technology, it publishes books, and it documents its own activities. V2_'s basic attitude toward electronic art is one of taking it as self-evident that, in a world filled with new media and new technologies, there will be artists who work and experiment with these technologies to make art, to react to the world, to express their feelings, to take a critical stance, or to shape a different “world.” The idea of a relation between the use of unstable media in society and in the arts is as self-evident for V2_ now as it was in 1987.

Presenting

In 1994 V2_ moved to Rotterdam. This move coincided with the upsurge of interest amongst artists in the possibilities of the Internet and the WWW for artistic expression and intervention. V2_ became one of the sites for this vibrant culture, and showed net art, as well as the work of artists working with virtual reality and 3-D projection. “Cyberspace” was the buzzword in

those days, and it was during that time that V2_ developed into a professional organisation with an international network. The Dutch Electronic Art Festival (DEAF) – organized more or less biannually – became the meeting ground for this network of artists and scientists. The first edition took place in 1994, the most recent one was the 2007 edition.

V2_ has a series of events that run throughout the whole year and combine lectures with performances and presentations in various formats. *Wiretap* was the longest-running series (1993-2002); this was followed by *Tangents* (2002-2007). The *dot.nu* series (2000-2002) presented works in progress by many live cinema artists, who at the time were often still studying at art school. The *Test_lab* series, which started in 2006, is meant as a showcase of work in progress. These events show the current state of unstable media, and are also an occasion to show what the V2_lab is developing, and to test it on a critical audience.

V2_ takes a thematic approach with all of these events. Every DEAF, for instance, had its own theme, and even from the titles, one can see V2_'s particular approach toward technological art.²¹ The emphasis lies on interaction, machine-body interface, and biological metaphors: *Digital Nature*, *Interfacing Realities*, *Digital Territories*, *The Art of the Accident*, *Machine Times*, *Information is Alive*, *Feelings are Always Local*, *Interact or Die!* These festivals were combinations of performances, concerts, an exhibition of mostly interactive installations, a film program, a symposium, lectures, workshops, expert meetings, and, occasionally, site-specific events. This has now become a standard format for new media art festivals.

The festival and presentation formats and the development of thematic programs probably have been more important to the curators and organizers of the DEAFs and other V2_events than theoretical curatorial considerations derived from the world of contemporary *visual* arts. For V2_ the context of technological arts and technological society with all of its fascinating developments (from computer games and scientific 3-D imagery to the uses of RFID, GPS, and biotechnology) comes first. But it is important to stress that technological arts are not about technology, they are about our world, about human feelings, our interactions with computers – or about any of the other “things” that contemporary art can be about. In that sense there is no difference between technological art and “traditional” art.

While organizing a festival, including an exhibition, the simple question of how to build (often complex) installations and how to place these inside the space available becomes a crucial concern. Works have to be set up properly so the audience can experience them fully. Because a festival often takes place at many different locations, it is possible to show performances on stage and computer installations in a semi-public space, as well as large installations in

a large space, and smaller works in separate rooms. Some works might be projected large on a wall, others screened on a monitor in a black (or white) box; other works might be screened on a monitor on a pedestal, and some works need a space as a playing field all on their own. Some works require a variety of exhibition modalities. Ideally, it is the work itself that determines the exhibition modality, yet in reality, compromises are also sought, necessitated by practical concerns.

354 | New media festivals characteristically incorporate and accommodate different ways of presenting. Both artists and organizers are (or should be) conscious of the fact that “presenting” an artwork on stage or on screen during a lecture or artist presentation (talking about the work, showing clips), is something different than presenting the work itself as an autonomous work in an exhibition. As V2_ aims to stimulate debate and develops works in collaboration with artists, this type of artist’s presentation is very important. They include also test setups and first public presentations of works in progress. Showing a work which is still in progress can give the artist important insights into how an installation is functioning and what needs to be calibrated or changed. In most cases, such presentations have to be distinguished, however, from an exhibition or a proper performance of a finished work.

Another issue is the fact that complex interactive installations and technological works are often further developed after the first “proper” exhibition of the work, often because with time, a better technology becomes available (for example, a new type of sensor, or better software). Works go through versions. On the other hand, several works might be developed using similar technology and a similar concept.

If this sounds as if mostly practical considerations determine the presentation formats, I could rephrase it by saying that the instability of the situation is taken as the starting point for finding the best way to present, exhibit, or even develop a work. In the end, it is the thematic approach that determines the choice of works to be shown. This is also true for the international exhibitions curated by V2_, such as Zone V2_ at MOCA in Taipei (2007).

Developing

At the V2_lab, artists collaborate on electronic art projects and technical research projects with hard- and software developers, technicians, and scientists. These long- and short-term projects focus on the use of new technologies for artistic means and on the cultural and social implications of these technologies. The research projects have resulted in software tools, mixed media applications, and artworks that have been presented at various V2_events.

Since 2010, the V2_lab has been researching the topics of augmented reality and wearable technology. Augmented reality is the term for the layering of digital information onto physical reality as we perceive it; wearable technology concerns technology that can be worn on the body, or becomes part of the body, and often looks for connections to the world of fashion. Both concern the naturalization of technology and the incorporation of technology by the body and the mind.

Dutch artist Marnix de Nijs has collaborated with V2_ on various occasions, including on an augmented reality game entitled *Exercises in Immersion*. This work is about how the body adapts to the world it perceives through its senses, even if the sensory information it receives is not congruent with reality. For this work, De Nijs required a system that senses a player's location in real time and tracks what the player is viewing. It took a long time to develop the technical aspects of this system and, to some extent, this stalled the development of the artistic concept. In the end, a workable solution was found, combining sensors with custom-made software, and a first public test of the installation was shown at DEAF in 2007. The installation needed a complete hall for itself (at Pakhuis Meesteren in Rotterdam); no other work was exhibited there. Now the work mainly "exists" for the public in the form of texts, photographs documenting the exhibition, and a number of videos, some of which are available at V2_'s website. One video shows De Nijs talking about the work, interspersed with footage from the installation and visuals explaining the technology.²²

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German artist Aram Bartholl developed his *Tweet Bubble Series* as an artist in residence at V2_. He started from the idea of showing Twitter messages on a T-shirt. Initially, Bartholl hoped to develop a T-shirt which could show any Twitter message, and code software that could connect the shirt to the Internet. This implied a very complex technological development process, which he (and others) assumed would not do justice to the simple, elegant concept. He subsequently realized four different versions of a shirt showing Twitter messages, using far simpler methods to get the idea across. *Pocket Tweets* used the mobile phone itself as screen: you put the phone in a special pocket on the front of the shirt; *Loud Tweets* used a LED name badge connected to the Internet; *Paper Tweets* lets you print out your most recent Twitter message on a sticker; and *Classic Tweets* is a thermochromatic T-shirt that can show three different classic Twitter messages. These versions were presented on stage in V2_ test lab, *Fashionable Technology*. This is a work that is very suitable for a type of artist presentation at an event. In addition to an artist talk in which the concept is shown, and maybe explained, it could include videos of former presentations or performances, a rehearsed performance, and/or an invitation to the public to try the works out for themselves. In fact, Bartholl often uses a mix of these forms – though a performative approach is important to him.

Documenting

Documenting works like *Tweet Bubble Series* and *Exercises in Immersion* includes recording both the conceptual and technological development as well as storing software and technical specifications. To preserve the work, one also has to store physical components. In the case of *Exercises in Immersion*, this is a complex and costly affair, as there is quite some hard- and software to take into account. Additionally, videos of presentations and performances should be stored, and it is also important to keep a record of the cultural contexts which were important to the development and the concept of the work; artist statements and interviews often give insight into this as well. For interactive works in particular, there is the issue of the calibration of the work (how fast or slow should it react?) and the preferred interaction. Such issues could be covered by descriptive texts, interaction diagrams, and video documentation of the work in action.

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Because V2_ has documented its own activities from early on, there is an archive of hundreds of videotapes, digital video files, and over 15,000 digital and digitized photographs.²³ These are an invaluable resource for the history of electronic and new media arts in the Netherlands. They also accidentally and partially document some of the works that were shown or developed at V2_, and thus continue their visibility on a different platform. To give an example: the video registration of Dick Raaijmakers performance *Intona* is probably the only video of this work in existence. What once was “just registration” can become an invaluable resource for art history or reconstruction only 20 years later. Similarly, the archive contains a live stream of the V2_ event at which Bartholl’s *Tweet Bubble Series* was presented, and photographs that document it, just as is the case for *Exercises in Immersion*. The task of the V2_ archive is to make this material, mostly digital born, accessible to the public through a website.

On V2_’s current website, items are connected through keywords, a related-items algorithm, and through editorial links (human-made connections between different items in the website). Works, events, people, organizations, articles, videos, and photographs are connected by both humans and machines, enabling the visitor to explore and discover the history of V2_ and technological art.²⁴ This can be seen as one of the presentation strategies of V2_ – many people will only get to know works through the online documentation. It is a way in which works “exist” for the public, although this type of “existence” should not be confused with the work itself. There are many artists who make work for online exhibition, but they are a minority among the artists who work and exhibit at V2_.

Ideally, documentation of works should grow over time. Essays and

reviews could be added over time, as could archival material dug up from V2_ computers. (An example of this are wikis used during the technical development.) Software used to run a work could be offered for download. When such documentation becomes very refined and rich, it seems almost possible to see it as a substitution for physical preservation. This, however, can never be the case for interactive installations, as these have to be experienced physically.

Video art – especially single-screen works – could indeed be preserved online. Additionally, screen-based digital or interactive work that can run on any normal computer can be preserved up to a certain extent in a digital archive. An example of this are several net artworks that V2_ hosted in the late 1990s that still have their original files on V2_'s server. One could give website users access to such works even if it means they just download the original files. Making a work function in a “sufficient” way, however, may or may not be possible at times, depending on the type of work. Often works made in the past were so technically simple (by 2011 standards) that they will still run without a problem. On the other hand, they might not run in the right way, as computers today are faster, browsers have changed, and some works made heavy use of the context of other websites that may have disappeared or radically changed since the 1990s. In other words: archiving the files is one thing, but the ways in which a net artwork can be brought to “life” can be best decided on a case-by-case basis, for instance when there is an opportunity to install or exhibit such a work again.

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NOTES

- 1 In 1965, Warhol recorded at least eleven videotapes with the Norelco camera. As indicated by Callie Angell, “the only accessible footage from these early video exists in [*Outer and Inner Space*], which Warhol, in effect, preserved by reshooting them in 16mm” (Angell, 2002).
- 2 I borrow the expression “light cube” from David Joselit (2004: 154).
- 3 Of course, some of them, such as Andy Warhol discussed above, but also VALIE EXPORT and Peter Weibel, were working with both mediums.
- 4 *Shadow Projection* was initially shown at The Kitchen in New York 9-18 May 1974. See The Kitchen Calendar: http://www.eai.org/user_files/supporting_documents/MAY74EAI.pdf (last access 5 August 2010). It was then shown in the exhibition *Projected Images* (Walker Art Center, 21 September-3 November 1974) discussed previously in this chapter.
- 358 | 5 An example of this approach is Goodwin (1992).
- 6 Dubois defines the “cinema effect” as follows: “this ‘cinema effect’ is extremely diversified, takes multiple forms, and operates at all levels (institutional, artistic, theoretical, or critical).” See page 312 of the present volume.
- 7 *VIDEO: 25 years of video aesthetics*, exhibition held at the NRW Forum in Düsseldorf 24 January-18 April 2004; *I want to see how you see*, exhibition held at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg 16 April-25 June 2010; *YouTube Play: A Biennial of Creative Video*, exhibition held at the New York Guggenheim 21 October 2010.
- 8 See Cytowic (2002); Weibel (1987). See also chapter 1 of the present volume. Paik’s background in music theory, and the influence of John Cage, are part of the context for his avant-garde musical practices and his attempts to break with Western musical conventions and representations, such as the live performances in which Paik destroyed a piano.
- 9 Links between the phenomenological qualities of sound and image as well as the possibility of creating new forms of experience are discussed in Siewert (2010).
- 10 MTV was launched in the US in 1981 with a video by The Buggles, aptly titled “Video Killed the Radio Star.” Six years later, MTV Europe was launched.
- 11 Steve Blame, cited in the introductory episode of the seven-part documentary series *Fantastic Voyages – Eine Kosmologie des Videoclips* (Director: Christoph Dreher, Assistant Director: Senta Siewert, produced in 2001 for Arte). Three noteworthy publications on the music video: Keazor and Wübbena (2005); Krüger and Weiss (2007); and Vernallis (2008). The latter characterizes the music video aesthetic as determined by an intensified audiovisual continuity.
- 12 Further artists whose work was shown include Dara Birnbaum, Peter Callas, Ingo Günther, Mariko Mori, Joe Pytko, Jo Sedelmaier, Tarsem Singh, Klaus vom Bruch, Ridley Scott, Traktor, Sophie Muller, and Rotraut Pape.

- 13 Other comparable exhibitions include: “Exposition of Music Electronic Television,” Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal (1963); “Art of Music Video,” Long Beach Art Museum (1989 + 1999); “What a Wonderful World – Music Video in Architecture,” Groningen Museum (1990); “Visual Music,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2004); “Sons & Lumières,” Centre Pompidou, Paris (2004); “The Art of Pop,” Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Cologne (2011). Another platform for music videos are DVDs, especially DVD collections of the work of individual music video directors, which have a wide potential audience: music fans, music video enthusiasts, as well as art aficionados. They buy these DVDS, which are also offered for sale in the gift shops of most contemporary art museums. To name just a few examples: *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*, *The Work of Michael Gondry*, *The Work of Director Spike Jonze*, *The Work of Director Anton Corbijn*, *The Work of Stephane Sednaoui*, *The Work of Mark Romanek* and *The Work of Jonathan Glazer*, *Various Artists – Music Video Art* (all released by EMI between 2003–2005).
- 14 Gondry directed the videos for *Human Behaviour* (1993), *Army of Me* (1995), *Isobel* (1995), *Hyperballad* (1996), *Jóga* (1997), and *Bachelorette* (1997). | 359
- 15 *Serpentine Dances* (France/USA ca. 1896-1898), 60m, 3’, 35mm, color, from the archive of the Cineteca di Bologna. The film program was curated by Eric de Kuiper and Mariann Lewinsky.
- 16 From an interview conducted during the 2010 festival, with students from my seminar on “Media Art Institutions and Promotion” (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, summer semester 2010). In the interviews, various film directors and organizers noticed that music videos are increasingly less associated with television and more often with visual art. Other important festivals in this context are the European Media Art Festival (Osnabrück), transmediale (Berlin), Ars Electronica (Linz), Internationales Bochumer Videofestival, and the International Symposium on Electronic Arts (various locations).
- 17 The jury members were Laurie Anderson, Animal Collective, Darren Aronofsky, Douglas Gordon, Ryan McGinley, Marilyn Minter, Takashi Murakami, Shirin Neshat, Stefan Sagmeister, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Nancy Spector.
- 18 The “cinema effect” can be found also in the Hamburg exhibition discussed above. The installation *Destroy She Said* (1998) by Monica Bonvicini shows selected film clips of various film divas, such as Monica Vitti in *L’Avventura* (1959), Jeanne Moreau in *La Notte* (1961), Catherine Deneuve in *Repulsion* (1965), and Brigitte Mira in *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973).
- 19 Many of the sources used for this article can be found on V2_’s website; Altena (2008 and 2009), Bartholl (2009), Mulder (2010) Mulder and Post (2000) and Nijs (2007) are referenced to directly.
- 20 For more information about V2_’s mission, history, and research, please see <http://www.v2.nl/organization>, <http://www.v2.nl/organization/mission>, and <http://www.v2.nl/lab/research>.

- 21 When I write “technological art” in this text I refer very broadly to art which in one way or another uses electronics and/or computers.
- 22 Available online at: <http://www.v2.nl/files/retrospective/2007-EI4.mp4/view>.
- 23 The current V2_archive should not be confused with V2_Archive, under which name V2_ released a large number of cassettes, some artist videos, LPs, and CDs in the 1990s. V2_Archive (as a cassette and record label) was run by Peter Duimelinks at V2_. V2_archive is now used as the name for the online archiving activities of V2_.
- 24 However, it needs to be said that the implementation of all the archive material on the website is far from finished. For instance, the presentation of a certain work developed in collaboration with V2_ would also ideally have descriptions of the software and hardware that was used, and would include links to software downloads (if developed by V2_) and technical documentation.

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