

# DIGITAL ART WEEKS: THE MEETING POINT BETWEEN ART & TECHNOLOGY

ART CLAY & STEFAN MÜLLER ARISONA

## I

### INTRODUCTION

The Digital Art Weeks Festival (DAW) takes place this year from the 9th to the 14th of July in downtown Zurich, Switzerland. For those people who are looking for and love complex relationships that link art and technology, these events should not be missed. As one would hardly expect, the DAW is not organized by your typical institute for the arts, but by a major league institute for computer science, the Computer Systems Institute of ETH Zurich.

The DAW does however have plenty of international friends and partners in various art institutes around the globe. For example, the Canada based „Interactive Futures Festival“ that takes place each year and which is linked to the Victoria Independent Film and Video Festival. The famous Cabaret Voltaire is also among DAW partners. Each year the DAW reinstates Zurich Dadaism with a program that explores the traditions of anti-art and its political tendencies with technology based performance art that rather flies over than walks in the footsteps of Hugo Ball.

At the core of the DAW are its two organizers, Art Clay the artistic director and Stefan Müller Arisona the scientific director. Art Clay is a well-known artist who has worked in an interdisciplinary manner since modern tools have allowed it, thus creating hybrid artworks and thereby stepping over borders way before most other artists even felt hedged in by them. Stefan Müller Arisona is a full-blown computer scientist with a doctorate. Although he has been doing serious research over many years and designing his own software tools, he has also been hacking away and working in clubs deep into the night for years in the best scenes to be found.

The activities of these two are anchored to the ETH Zurich by Professor Dr. Juerg Gutknecht, who chairs the DAW as ETH Zurich's representative and provides the balance between culture, science and industry within the settings of the DAW. Many projects of his research group make their way into the program each year, thus proving that computer science is omnipotent in a modern world and no longer constrained to traffic light systems, flight booking or off shore banking. Professor Gutknecht's own belief is that it has broken out and has made its depute in all facets of digital culture from the iPod to instruments for today's performing artists.

In an interview given during the Swiss Composer Alliance Festival in Monthey, Switzerland in 2004, Professor Gutknecht provided his viewpoint on having artists in one of the top labs research labs in the country and as to what service they might provide for it. When asked, how having artists working closely with members of his research group has effected the work being done there, he said:

„Artists appear as a silver line on the horizon. Their major role is to constantly challenge our research and technology rather than directing or redirecting it. While it

is easy (and has become quite common) for computer scientists to solve their own, carefully and iteratively self-made problems within the often-cited ivory tower, the vision of a creative non-computer scientist typically provides a very hard nut to crack. In addition, artists successfully act as natural motivators, animators and integrators. The awareness of an unavoidably approaching hour of truth (the performance) makes an inter-departmental team of collaborators push together in a single direction. Without such a situation, I can hardly imagine doing constructive systems research in 'new media' without artist partners.“

## II

### THE DAW PROGRAMM

Each year, the organizers of the Digital Art Weeks seek out relevant themes that coexist between art and science and which express themselves as part of a global movement of digital communications culture. The following statement made by Art Clay in an interview given in Manchester Airport with the Director of DigiCult's Digimag, Beatrice Bonfanti sums things up in this regard:

„I started the DAW program about three years ago because I had a deep interest in soft machines as art tools. Computers are simply the easiest machines to adapt for the purpose of creating art. Of course, digital art and digital music are meant here. Also, my work as director of the DAW has always much to do with finding ways to cross-stylistic boundaries in terms of genre and occupational boundaries in terms of artists getting somehow involved in research. The program of the DAW 2006, for example, reflects this quite well. Two works of mine that were on that program, 'GoingPublik' for distributed ensemble with wearable computers and 'China Gates' for an ensemble playing tuned gongs being conducted by satellites, are good examples of how an artist can create works which are proofs of concepts for the technologies they are based on.“

### SYMPOSIUM

As might be expected, things get more serious and informative on the hows and whys of using technology in the arts during the DAW's [Kon[Text]] Symposium. Written in poetical coding language to echo varied meaning upon rereading, the title (*read* "In context text") makes reference to the concept of our grant program –i.e. the core philosophy behind the whole DAW. The KonText Grant is awarded to artists who are interested in speaking about their work within a scientific context and performing it in a cultural context during the Digital Art Weeks. The philosophy behind the grant is to offer the public not only the aesthetic experience of viewing an artist's work, but to offer them the opportunity to discuss the work and the technologies involved within the academic setting of a Symposium.

The Symposium basically focuses on two main issues, the first being the concept of the "performative surround" and the second the "public and performer divide." So, in homage to recent developments in media art and performance, symposium

participants address issues of computer mediated communication in the arts and other aspects surrounding the expressive mode of technology. This is done by bringing the issue of real-time anything and everything into the symposiums with an extensive array of topics that examine the use of electronic media in articulating the performer's presence through the possibilities of multi-sensuality of electronic media. The outcome of this within an actual art context is the blurring of the divide between public and performer. It is bonding them with the powers of dissemination and inclusion within the electronic surround and communication between them can be interactively networked in real-time through various forms of computer enhanced dialoging.

## **THE DAW FESTIVAL**

The festival of the DAW has several projects that are realized annually. These are the "Driftings" and the "SoundScape" projects. They are two of the program events that help bridge the Symposium to the Art Events. This is done by providing artistic presence with what we have come to term „Art-Windows“. These coexist with the lectures throughout the day and provide a needed contrast to the program of lectures and demonstrations.

The Driftings project is an exhibition. Invited artists create "moving still images" for the Visdome at ETH Zurich. The Visdome contains a large curved projection screen, which can be filled from edge to edge with a projected image on account of a set of coupled projectors. The project revolves around the idea of using the screen as a uniquely formed "canvas" upon which a series of virtual art works is exhibited. Each of the chosen artworks has been generated with the use of a computer and each process used is conceptually different. Conceived in relationship to the times of day, the exhibition consists of a morning, an afternoon, and an evening art-window. This cycle, which takes place each day over a period of four days, allows the visitor to concentrate on each of the artworks and to see how they unfold, as all are non-static and change very slightly over time dependent on position of the viewer in the room and the duration the viewer looks at the image.

The DAW and the Stereolith Company send out a call each year for stereophonic soundscape works. The works are selected on their ability to "evoke" the presence of things or beings in space and to the extent in which each work "immerses" the listener into a completely imaginary sonic environment. The sound artist's intentions as per evocation and immersion are met uniquely by the Stereolith loudspeaker system, which is a true innovation for the recreation of recordings made to playback in stereo. Unlike traditional loudspeaker configurations, the Stereolith is a single construction in which both the "left" and the "right" channels have been incorporated. In this way, the system can be installed at any point within the listening space and allows the listener to experience each work from any point within the space as if it was a live event.

## **THIS YEARS THEMES**

This year's program is based around the themes of the calls the DAW sent out world wide in the fall of 2006. At the Cabaret Voltaire, the program sets an accent on

performance art using electronic media. The concept of the performative surround makes its way in to the Cabaret Voltaire under the guise of two projects, entitled “Cabled Madness” and “B.I.O.”.

Cabled Madness refers to the critic of Joseph Weizenbaum that society went mad when it took into consideration the Star Wars System of defense. In the same vein, but on a more rational level without collateral damage, the performances that will get presented are works that empower the performer in an explosion of the boundaries of the body and link the audience into the virtual of technologically animated space. Like Weizenbaum’s plea for sanity in computer application, the works trigger critical observation in the mind of the audience and counter act the most logical form of evolution in the 21st century enabled by technology: Intelligence without morals.

The title of the project “B.I.O.” is an abbreviation for “To Be the Input or the Output is the Question”. In the popular sci-fi film The Matrix, the human being is reduced to a copper-top battery with an output of 1.5 volts. In regard, tapping the human body as an output has become an interesting way to "power up" performance and stage presence in the electronic music and new media art genres. The performances that will be presented for this project are works that concentrate on sensors systems, which take their input from and respond to changes in brainwaves, galvanic response, heart rate etc. and whose outputs are then transmapped to audio or video events. Performance is then brought into the ironic realm of performing art not only with voluntary and but with an involuntary signals.

These two themes will stretch over three nights. Many of the presenting artists will also give talks during the Symposium on the technologies they use and how these have shaped their work.

At a former power plant, the festival will be closed with a big party centered around pop trivialities based on Warhol’s “Exploding Plastic Inevitable”. There you can check out bizarre robotic sculptures, installations, a few nasty bands in the tradition of the Velvets, and last but not least be part of Zurich’s party scene, when regionally and internationally famed Djs and Vjs will make your bones twitch and your retina dilate.

## **HAVING FUN IN ZURICH**

John Cage wrote once about the most important question before going on tour: „Where are we going and what are we going to eat?“ Well, the DAW will answer that question too. Zurich is a beautiful city filled with great restaurants and for those who like to shop, the old part of the city is filled with lovely small shops with stunning fine goods. It has a great and cheap public transport system of trams, busses and even ferries, which can take you to all the sights in the city worth seeing. Lake Zurich and the Limmat River are a stone throw away from the conference hotels. So, with your head filled with new ideas and your heart satisfied with great performances, you can jump right in - from early in the morning to late at night - and cool off in beautiful blue mountain waters.

Art Clay

Stefan Mueller Arisona  
Zürich, March 2007