

## ***Machine Does Not Give Change***

Sarah Donderer, Yannick Hofmann, Daria Mille, Philipp Ziegler

With the exhibition *Machine Does Not Give Change*, this year's edition of the Device\_art festival puts a special focus on artistic expressions that deal subversively and critically with machine devices and technological innovations. Our world today is profoundly technological, with digital and machine devices dominating nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Our collective imaginations are largely constructed through media, while technologies not only change the conditions of our lives, but also increasingly define the social space of human coexistence. In view of the enormous scope of the social and cultural transformations triggered by technologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we are hardly aware that many of these developments, such as the Internet or the global positioning system (GPS), which have become indispensable in our lives, were originally developed for the military and were only transferred to the civilian sphere at a later stage. By engaging with technological innovations in a disruptive way, contrary to their original industrial, commercial or even military purpose, artists undermine the dominant normative ideologies associated with technologies and mock the logic of their capitalist commercialization. With their experimental and often seemingly unprofessional use, artists demonstrate that the latest technologies are not exclusively at the service of large corporations to maximise profits, or states to provide them with perfidious tools for controlling their citizens, but rather that they are a social good that must benefit all human and non-human actors on this planet. In a creative, thoroughly humorous way, the works in the exhibition therefore show that, in view of the enormous developments to be expected in the field of artificial intelligence, machine learning and quantum computing, there is more than ever a need to critically question technologies by artistic means in order to thus deconstruct epistemologically the understandings of the world that they generate.

With reference to the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, whose work has focused on the historical development of media systems and their use in the military's service, the artist, curator, and theorist, Peter Weibel, who has directed the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe as artistic and scientific chairman for more than 20 years, calls media art the "misuse of military devices", and the "deconstruction of industrial apparatuses".<sup>1</sup> Media Art is defined by Peter Weibel as an art form that must fulfil any of the following three conditions: apparatus-based production, apparatus-based distribution, or apparatus-based reception. Our time is characterized by us "living in a closed loop of apparatus-based production, circulation, and reception of information that is supported and sustained by technical devices. Media have become an information environment."<sup>2</sup> Storage and recording technologies thereby represent, according to Weibel, a fourth condition of Media Art, which is crucial for the configuration of media and their potentials. New models of communication between humans and machines are emerging, especially with regard to electronically stored information. Through digital computing power, in today's post-media era, in which "all different media mutually determine and influence each other" (Peter Weibel), the apparative arts merge into a universal machine in the sense of Alan Turing.

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Weibel, "Die Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst, Peter Weibel über Medienkunst. Ein Gespräch von Sabine B. Vogel", *Kunstforum International*, no. 277, October 2021, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Weibel, "Media Art: A Definition", see: <https://www.cityofmediaarts.de/what-is-media-art-for-us> (last accessed on 26th October 2021)

In Marshall McLuhan's seminal 1964 publication, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, the innovations of the electronic age are described as extending the functions of the human body: radio extends the human hearing function, the gramophone extends the voice, and television extends the gaze. According to McLuhan, then, the world is perceived almost exclusively through the media. This penetration into everyday life by the media, which was still in its infancy in the 1960s compared to today's digital world, has undoubtedly reached a new level today. The extent to which the compensation of human abilities through media, or rather, through apparatuses, defines the possible scenarios of future life can be traced in numerous works in the exhibition, which reflect in a critical and ironic way on the significance of technical devices and provocatively demonstrate the ambiguity of their functionality.

It is important to briefly touch upon today's framework conditions for artistic experimentation with technology and acknowledge that a higher level of accessibility for artists is prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to work with advanced computer technologies, for instance, artists had to collaborate closely with the industry, as computers were both far too large for their studios and too expensive. Access to expertise was also limited. Hence, operating state-of-the-art technology was reserved for only a handful of artists. In the age of rapidly accelerating technological progress, however, technology is increasingly open to artists. The emergence of the open-source movement, sharing culture and the quasi-universal availability of all visual, audio, and textual material on the Internet, have created many new access points for artists working with technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through the shared encyclopaedic knowledge of the world, learning materials available online, such as video workshops and step-by-step tutorials, it is possible to acquire knowledge about the deepest technical concerns over the application and misuse of technologies. This has led to a rigorous opening of artistic practices and a continuous trend towards multi-disciplinarity. Artists often seem no longer to strive for technical perfection and virtuosity within a particular medium, instead experimenting with a wide variety of tools and technologies.

In their genuine approach, artists establish new configurations, often creating new contexts of meaning and developing interesting new perspectives. The term "cutting edge" more or less refers to the latest state-of-the-art technology; cutting edge is literally so sharp that one could cut oneself. Whereas the term "bleeding edge" refers to such innovative approaches, for example, to technical systems that are not yet ready for the market, if they integrate various unstable systems, have not yet been sufficiently tested or there is not yet enough experience with this technology. Artists work at the bleeding edge.

In *device art*, technology is also possibly but never exclusively used as a tool to create a work of art, since the device itself becomes the work of art. However, sometimes open-ended artistic experimentation, even unintentionally, stimulates technological development for the consumer sector, as media technology research and artistic production have a reciprocal relationship. As early as 1963, media artist Nam June Paik had visitors acoustically generating electronic images on tube televisions and interacting with them as part of his Wuppertal landmark exhibition, *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*. This was before the light organ became popular in the 1970s or the Japanese company Atari developed the *Video Music System*, an audio activated video display that could convert sounds into colours and patterns.

By adding new functions to the original functioning of familiar everyday devices and technical apparatuses, or by taking them ad absurdum, artists can even give rise to new hybrid forms. For these, in the mid-1960s, American Fluxus artist Dick Higgins coined the term "intermedia".

Higgins used this term to name emerging artistic phenomena at the intersection of different art forms or even non-artistic forms, provided that the original forms can no longer be clearly distinguished from each other after their merger.<sup>3</sup> For example, we could consider the processual works published by John Cage as intermedia between music and Zen philosophy, or discuss acoustic ecology as an intermedium between acoustics and ecology. For that reason, with this exhibition we propose an understanding of *device art* as the integration of an everyday technical object into an artistic object or configuration that critically and ironically reflects on the original purpose.

The exhibition title, *Machine Does Not Give Change*, refers to different kinds of machines in public spaces that require exact change to bring about their services. This “found title” also creates a space for reflection about agency of technological apparatuses, their entanglement with social structures and our attitude towards techniques in general, including, for example, hyping or dooming and rejecting them.

Following the reasoning of French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour, we would like to propose a change of our perspective on techniques. At the horizon of utopia of modernity there was technological hype: once we possess a certain technology, we can master and control the situation. Machines were introduced to optimize working processes, save time, increase accuracy and be able to manufacture identical products. Technological devices had to take over the routine and dangerous work, as well as to serve and relieve workers from physical and mental strain. In the meantime, we became so dependent on them that we often forget what they actually do. Techniques and technology are usually taken as something rational and objective that does not involve unintended consequences such as pollution, waste, depletion of natural resources or social inequality. Modern thinking placed at the forefront the idea of the mastery of the rational, automatic and transparent pieces of technology. Thus, techniques always form an integral part of the vast narrative that makes them engage with an advancing modernizing frontier. And in the words of Bruno Latour, “nothing is further from the experience of inventing, developing, coping, and dealing with techniques”.<sup>4</sup> How many computers and how much power are needed to support the “cloud”? How many human and non-human actors are needed to create and maintain something that operates in a fully automatic way? How many resources such as rare-earth minerals are needed to produce a mobile phone?

The hype and belief in the mastery of technology deepens the dividing line between the social and technological. However, “society and technology are not ontologically distinct entities but more like phases of the same essential action”<sup>5</sup>. We propose a rethinking of the simplistic idea about our relation to techniques in terms of the tool for the intention, as a means of direct access to goals: “The paradox of technology is that it is always praised for its functional utility, or always held in contempt because of its irritating neutrality, although it has never ceased to introduce a history of enfoldings, detours, drifts, openings and translations that abolish the idea of function as much as that of neutrality. [...] Behind the tired repetition of the theme of the

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<sup>3</sup> Dick Higgins, “Statement on Intermedia”, New York 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, Christophe Leclercq (Eds.), “reset modernity!”, published by ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA / London, England, 2016, p. 305.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, “Technology Is Society Made Durable,” in: John Law (Ed.), “A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination, Sociological Review Monograph” No. 38 pp. 103-132, New York: Routledge, 1991, here p. 129.

neutrality of ‘technologies-that-are-neither-good-nor-bad-but-will-be-what-man-makes-of-them’, or the theme, identical in its foundation, of ‘technology-that-becomes-crazy-because-it-has-become-autonomous-and-no-longer-has-any-other-end-except-its-goalless-development’, hides the fear of discovering a reality so new to modern man, who has acquired the habit to dominate, that: there are *no masters anymore* – not even crazed technologies.”<sup>6</sup> Due to the deep climatic mutations that we are witnessing at the moment, it has become impossible to believe in the hype anymore. We would like to follow Latour’s proposal to escape the idealized vision of technology and to investigate the contexts and histories of this or that technique, or how many, and what human and non-human actors, institutions and histories are involved in its production. It is not so much that we forge technology or that technology has an influence on us – but rather, that we are mutually transforming each other, entangled together in a net of mutual interdependencies that need to be investigated. Can we take a path of innovation in which all the actors co-evolve? Can we start to describe our relations within a socio-technological network, in which actants come in on different trajectories and enter into a process of translation, whereby the social assemblage is shared with non-humans? Is it possible to innovate but without the modernizing hype and link the techniques not to mastery and posthumanism, but to society and legal systems? “Techniques are always born deficient and have to be cared for; if not, they become criminal or useless. Technologies have to be loved – but loved for good, not for hype, denial, or pornography.”<sup>7</sup> Extending on the thoughts of Bruno Latour, in this exhibition, we would like to propose innovation without the hype and the understanding of technique as a process, as something that has history and is weaved into the vast social fabric together with other non-humans. Just like humans, technology has its own terms and needs to be negotiated with.

The artistic works in the exhibition intend a playful *détournement* of the functionality, a reversal of the sense of technology – for the sake of investigation of these questions. Apparatuses are here represented as systems capable of producing their own stories and narratives. The focal point is not instrumentality, but the mode of the detour. Whereas techniques are supposed to be objective and fully mastered, the pieces in the exhibition present them as not mastered and full of surprising twists and tricks. This reversal of functionality allows us to deconstruct the domination of technique, which is so all-embracing that it has become invisible. Instead of hyping or damning technology, we would like to invite the visitors to reflect on the meaning and modes of existence of technology in a critical and sober way. The ready-made title, *Machine Does Not Give Change*, reflects on Marcel Duchamp’s ironic gesture, Jean Tinguely’s useless machines and Fluxus performative tradition, as an impulse for a critical attitude towards the hype.

The exhibited performative installations and objects made of repurposed everyday devices, ironically and provocatively question the capabilities of machines and their influence on the perception of the self and the planet. From how various relationships established with technology have affected the way humans perceive the planet and interact with each other, or how technology changes the notion of one’s own body or the senses, to reflecting on the

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Latour, “Morality and Technology. The End of the Means,” in: “Theory, Culture and Society,” Vol.19, No. 5/6, 2002, p. 247-260, here p. 255.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Latour, Christophe Leclercq (2016), p. 305.

overconsumption of toxic materials, the adherence to existing routines or the dystopian narrative of machines taking control.

So when wandering through the exhibition space you may be provoked to scream instead of using a button with your fingertip to activate a daily object and extend your own bodily expression that has been limited by the typical daily choreographies with devices and machines. By strolling through a field of engineered whiskers that vibrate by the measured airflow in the area, one's own senses might expand and create a sensorial relationship to the space and the machines. When we lose our bearings in space, it is easy to quickly turn to the usual app that has taken over this sense. But what if the system can be tricked and the nearby traffic jam marked dark red is not really there? Would you then rather jump on a bike – which would also be more eco-friendly? And suddenly, there would be electronic music, powered by collaborative creative energy and muscle power, making the necessary energy resources visible, audible, and tangible. With regained and newly explored senses, all the different nuances of the synthetic noises, assembled by small found objects arranged in surprising ways, moved by small robotic helpers, create an intimate concert, which might prove soothing in these hard times of pandemics, material scarcity and climate chaos. Perhaps the plastic that is used in this installation could be recycled in a closed circuit – mixed, heated, melted, formed and moving in different ways, living as small organisms in the exhibition space until they can start their journey back into the production cycle. Would machines give change or would they continue their tasks relentless and unimpressed, until there is no more fish to catch left or the last tree has been cut down?

Maybe Machine Does Not Give Change – Alone. It is the variety of reconfigurations, combinations, and creative reuses of machines that challenge the original purpose, question the impact on life on this shared planet, and open up possibilities for new collaborations with everyday devices.

### **Sarah Donderer**

Sarah Donderer is a curator focusing on the intersections of art, science and technology. After studying art history and sociology in Munich, she worked as a coordinator and curatorial assistant at Kunstverein München and completed her academic traineeship at Deichtorhallen Hamburg. She has been involved in various exhibitions and art projects, including at the design museum Die Neue Sammlung in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich and the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden, and worked as a freelance project manager and assistant director for independent theater productions. Since April 2020, she holds the position of a curator at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe and has co-curated and co-coordinated the digital opening festival of the scientific and artistic collaboration project *Driving the Human*.

### **Yannick Hofmann**

Yannick Hofmann is an artist and curator who currently works as the deputy director of artistic research and production at ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. He coordinates the ZKM's activities within numerous international cooperation projects at the intersection of art, science and technology. As an artist he has been internationally active in Europe, Russia, North America, Southeast Asia and India. Recent exhibitions include group exhibitions in the Museum of Contemporary Art (Zagreb), Galerie NTK (Prague), Match Gallery (Ljubljana), Galerie Thomas Schulte (Berlin) and the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. His numerous festival participations range from international new media art festivals (MUTEK,

Gamma Festival, Ars Electronica) to contemporary music and sound art festivals (Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, SPOR festival). Hofmann has held numerous teaching positions at the Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences and the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT).

### **Daria Mille**

Daria Mille is currently a curator and research associate at the ZKM | Center Art and Media Karlsruhe. Her research interests centre on topics related to the intersection of art, science and technology, as well as cultural and artistic implications of digitization. Most recently, she has been a member of the curatorial committee of the exhibition *Critical Zones. Observatories for Earthly Politics* and has curated and co-curated among others the following exhibitions: *Negative Space. Trajectories of Sculpture* (2019), *Art in Motion. 100 Masterpieces With and Through Media* (2018), *Hybrid Layers* (2017/2018) at the ZKM. She gives lectures internationally, is the author of several scientific essays and other publications and a member of various juries.

### **Philipp Ziegler**

Philipp Ziegler is a curator and currently the head of the Curatorial Department at ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. There, he has been responsible for numerous exhibitions since 2012, including *Seasons of Media Arts* (2021, 2020), *respektive Peter Weibel* (2019), *Hybrid Layers* (2017), and *Exo-Evolution* (2016). Besides the ZKM, he curated or co-curated several international projects such as the ifa (Institute for Foreign Relations) exhibition *Future Perfect. Contemporary Art from Germany*, which has toured internationally since 2013. In 2018, he was one of the curators of the 6<sup>th</sup> Guangzhou Triennial at the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China. He has written articles and essays in various magazines and catalogues and was recently the co-editor of the publication *Digital Imaginaries. African Positions Beyond Binaries*. He studied art history and history in Stuttgart, Germany and Milan, Italy.