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HOW TO GET A LOCAL AUDIENCE TO TAKE AN INTEREST IN INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ART – A USER’S GUIDE

Decades of festivals, institutions for media art and a scattering of museums with departments that include new media have reached out to audiences with mixed success. The Edith Russ Site for Media Art has initiated a number of programs designed to bring artists from outside to interact with the people from the City of Oldenburg (population 157,000). Many of the programs have been successful, others are less successful, and with some programs it depends on how success is measured. This guide should provide some insight into the experiences of the first years.

Infrastructure

Edith Ruff was a teacher and journalist who saved her *Pfennige* all her life and left the City of Oldenburg approximately two million DM to build a place for "art an artists at the transition into the twenty-first century". The municipal government interpreted these words by establishing two buildings: a split-level hall for exhibitions and events with approximately 300 sq. meters of floorspace (art) as well as a guest house with one large and two small studio apartments (artists). The complex is dedicated to the growing field of media art (transition into the twenty-first century). The Edith Russ Site for Media Art was opened in January of 2000.

Personnel

There is a curatorial assistant (wissenschaftliche Mitarbeit) and two dedicated part-time technicians who cover the very basic technical requirements of new media. The lack of a secretary, registrar, marketing and press person, education director as well as personnel for a workshop is a pain felt every working day. Nonetheless, as a city institution there is the apparatus of a working municipality – bookkeepers, janitors, people who care for the building. This may sound obvious to some, but most of the traditional outlets for media art such as festivals do not have this infrastructure on a year-round basis, although one spends at least a year planning each festival. Basically, the Edith Russ Site for Media Art has the personnel infrastructure that is somewhere between a Kunstverein and a museum.

Technical infrastructure. Flexibility. Invest wisely.

Considering the rapid process of evolving technology, the key to an institution’s technical infrastructure is flexibility. Virtually unlimited access to Internet lines and stable electricity are two things that few art institutions have, but are absolutely necessary for the presentation of media art. Many museums do not have the know-how when it comes to this type of infrastructure and think it will be incredibly expensive to install. Actually, it is quite inexpensive and more a matter of willingness on the part of directors and curators than a matter of money. Also, this kind of infrastructure is relatively easy to find funding for because it is something easily grasped by sponsors who understand that modern institutions need modern technology. Every bank and insurance company, for instance, has a large and stable technical infrastructure.

Whereas there was a time when production equipment was expensive, today most things such as digital cameras, editing software, personal computers, and sound equipment are not only low in price, but also small and mobile. Most artists can afford the basics and have their own equipment attuned to their needs, and it is not necessary for a media art site to buy an enormous amount of technical equipment. As a matter of fact, renting sometimes makes more sense when considering the constantly decreasing value of bought equipment. When it comes to presentation, the basic needs are an array of video, slide and film projectors of very high quality and a few computers.

Constantly changing standards of players such as DVD, mini-DV, VHS and such is frustrating because technology evolves so rapidly. It is best to buy only what is necessary from event to event instead of investing in package deals of hardware and software.

Concept of the site.

It was not until 2001 that a permanent position for an artistic director was put into place.¹ At this time, a concept for the program was formulated,² which follows the special needs of media art and also integrates it into the greater context of the contemporary visual arts. This phase of the Edith Russ Site's history opened with a series of screenings and talks in order to illustrate how media art often does not fit well into the white cube as it can be processual, time-based and temporary by nature. Installations or net art, for example are not necessarily made for longer exhibition and video art is most often not made for a loop. For these reasons, the concept included having periods of no exhibition, but instead opening its doors only at certain times, much like a movie theater or concert hall. The exhibitions were to concentrate on how mass media or electronic media has an impact on art, aesthetics and contemporary life. In practice this means not specifically exhibiting art which is electronic, but framing all media of contemporary art from the perspective of media theory.

The first step toward fulfilling this concept was initiated with the three part series *Contemporary Media Art*³, in which artists and curators were invited to give a current report on three of the traditional categories of media art: video art, interactive art and net art.⁴ Søren Grammel's screening and discussion, for instance, did not go through the textbook history of video beginning with Paik's global groove. Instead he showed works from the then-recent Videonale, which featured a younger batch of artists who are less a part of the video art avantgarde than a reflection of the kind of ambient video, which has been produced for galleries and museums since the mid-90s. Söke Dinkla's talk on interactive art spoke not of potentials – a trap of fantasies that many theorists fall into – but of what had been produced thus far. Vuk Coşic passed review on net art from its beginnings, its political dimensions and the crisis in which it lay at the time. It was important to bring Oldenburg's audience up to speed by inviting guests who were asked to talk about art through showing artworks, not just theorizing on them.

The second step began with *Avatars and Others*⁵, which followed the *Contemporary Media Art* series. This exhibition looked at the extension of the self into virtual space and featured painting by Markus Huemer, which paralleled figures living in the worlds of Internet fantasy to Renaissance ideals of arcadia, next to Lynn Hershman's photographic portraits of Roberta, a character Hershman assumed during a years-long private performance in the 1970s. Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room No. 2*, which had only been shown once before in 1974 when it first was built for his students in Nova Scotia, was a representative early example of the extension of the self into the mirror of video while Kristin Lucas portrayed her animated doppelgänger helplessly caught in a video game environment. The show introduced a concept of media art being less about technology and more about the effects of media – be it mass media, electronic media or new media – on the individual from an aesthetic perspective. It raised the question of what is media art. The Edith Russ Site for Media Art answers solely by providing examples. By showing a broad spectrum of (media) art the question is both refused and answered by constantly throwing new possibilities into the ring.

Presentation. Event and Exhibition.

An initiative which best illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of presenting media art is Blast Theory's art game *Can You See Me Now? Oldenburg* (2003). The British art group took over the site while creating a virtual Oldenburg that was both online and in the real inner city. The capabilities of the Edith Russ Site's technical infrastructure were pushed to the edge by Blast Theory's bandwidth needs as well as the physical and financial resources of housing up to 8 artists and external technicians for over two weeks. Yet this was also a testament to the necessity of bundling resources and expertise at institutions specifically dedicated to media art, as it would

be very difficult to find a contemporary museum that would be willing and able to pull off a media art project of this scale.

For three days players could log on to Blast Theory's game and run as an avatar through the virtual streets of Oldenburg while the "real" artists ran through the city streets, equipped with GPS systems and little computers that showed the map of where all the real and virtual participants were on screen. Through walkie talkies, the artists spoke with each other and streamed their sound to those chatting at home. The object was to avoid being captured by the artists chasing the virtual avatars through the streets in a game of tag where the real and the virtual collapse. It worked magnificently, but not just because of the technical wizardry. It was the physical and mental stress of the chase that allowed the players at home (or those who came to play at the Edith Russ Site) to get so into the game that they were no longer mentally sitting in front of a computer, but felt they were in Oldenburg with a runner hot on their trail. This event was also extremely successful in that the city was in a gaming fervor and people were chatting from Oldenburg to Indiana – as is the nature of the Internet. The decision to show the game as a documentary installation in the exhibition hall for three weeks after the game, on the other hand, was less of a success in terms of people interested to come and see what had happened. Other than the locals who had participated online there were few visitors. The lesson that an event cannot always somehow be forced into an exhibition situation was learned the hard way. It is very similar to the problems of archiving and documenting performance art or much of Fluxus. Once the event is over, the magic of the materials left over deflates.

Building a dialogue.

The series *Outside, Inside and In Between – The Stranger as a Projection of the Self*, was carried out in 2002. Lisl Ponger, Marcel Odenbach and Ingrid Mwangi were invited to present their art in a mixture of talk and performance. The artists were asked to screen their works and prepare themselves to address the audience with the curator's help. This means they did not read statements, but instead thought up ways to strike up a conversation with the audience. Lisl Ponger, for instance, screened her film *déjà vu* (1999), talked a bit about it and asked a very interested audience for a few questions and critiques. There was a 15 minute break for food and drink where the audience could talk amongst themselves and digest what they had just seen. Then the 23 minute film was screened a again, this time with Ponger giving a running commentary on its many languages, images and stories. The discussion was opened up again and went on deep into the night.

Ingrid Mwangi's contribution to the series was her performance *A woman in Purdah* (2002). Afterwards, the audience was again invited to eat and drink while Mwangi changed and got ready to talk with the audience. She then stepped again in front of the audience, which had had a moment to gather its thoughts and was mentally ready to react to the performance instead of just consume it, and answered a broad panorama of questions. Of course, it is not always easy for an artist to speak on his or her own work or the artist can not always be present. In the case of the screening of Harun Farocki's film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (1988), Hito Steyerl was asked to give a commentary on the film.

It has been the experience in Oldenburg that there is little fundamental knowledge of media art, but people do want to discuss many of the topics it addresses and they also want to have their sense of art challenged. They want to gather and talk in a collective experience and at a place away from their daily lives of home and work. People do want event culture, but the event does not have to be a spectacle, as many interpret the idea of the event. The trick is to find the right format. Contemporary art in general, not just media art, is intimidating for most people. Many institutions, politicians and marketing "experts" seem to think that popularism is the answer, but they are wrong. Dumbing down for the audience makes for a superficial program that is undeserving of public funding. Yet suffocating the artwork under a load of theory in prepared speeches cannot be the answer either. The answer is straight talk and a sensibility for making it possible for an audience to raise questions. Give them the material, a moment to think, a receptive person to talk to, and an audience will respond positively. Even if they do not like a particular event they will appreciate the chance to say so.

Art has left the building.

It is imperative to broadcast media art beyond the physical building of the institution. This has a long tradition found in the WGBH television experiments in Boston or WDR in Germany of the 60s, 70s and 80s when artists were given broadcast time for their own purposes. Today, arte still dedicates some time to artist's video for its audience in Germany and France, but there are few other outlets.

Yet open access radio and cable television stations do exist and in Lower Saxony there are many, including one in Oldenburg. The Edith Russ Site has its own monthly program called *Video Visions* featuring 30 minutes of artist's video. Videos from the exhibition and event program are often shown in addition to artist's videos not seen on site. This brings video art to a greater audience and draws attention to the site's program. Also, the radio station has been used by artist to create their own programming in whatever language they speak, reading their texts, playing music and generally communicating to the people of Oldenburg through the airwaves. At this writing Călin Dan, a 2004 stipend artist, is planning the simultaneous broadcasts of Romanian music and Romanian artists video. The audience can sit in their living rooms with the radio tuned to the oldenburg eins station while also watching Dan's videos on oldenburg eins television for a multi-media performance in their own homes.

Local Network

It takes a village to make something as obscure as a media art site successful in a relatively small city. It is necessary to find out which local institutions work in related fields and then bring everyone together. The radio and cable television channel is one example. Another is working together with educational institutions. Most every larger adult education center (Volkshochschule) has media programs today and Oldenburg's is especially active in media art. The city is also fortunate to have the Carl von Ossietzky University, which began a Media Art Master of Arts program at the same time the Edith Russ Site was founded. Until now, the site has offered the media art students practical workshops led by "international" artists such as Werner Nekes, the Dutch electronic music institution STEIM, artists from the exhibition program such as Mark Bain or from the stipend program such as Florian Zeyfang. The workshop cooperation will change, however, in the next year because the structure inside German universities is in the process of reforming. New types of cooperation are being planned and formulated in a colloquium of professors, students and the site's director.

It is important to take part in every event that brings together the city's various cultural activities. *Can You See Me Now? Oldenburg* was held as part of Oldenburg's *Kultursommer*, in which art, theater, dance, literature and music events take place during an intense month of artistic activity. A second example is the project *Cultuur!*, a city-wide series of events where Dutch art and culture could be experienced. The media art site took advantage of this date to promote its new teenager's educational program, which begins with a project by Amsterdam's Waag Society. The Edith Russ Site takes part in almost every such event in the city, but without compromising its program. This means not bowing to popularism by offering tango lessons or belly dancers, which has become the kind of fare often found in art institutions during popular "long nights of art" and other comparable events. This kind of pandering is extremely tempting because it almost guarantees large numbers of visitors, and success in culture has come to mean high visitor statistics to a frighteningly growing segment of sponsors and politicians.

Stipends. Production Network.

There are basically two ways to assist artists in production. The first is to supply them straight up with funding. The second is to provide an infrastructure and produce for specific events and exhibitions to take place on site.

Stipends

For this mid-sized city, it makes little sense to have a stipend program with a residency requirement. There is no point in chaining the artist to a certain spot as was the case in the days of artist colonies. After all, artists need to network – especially when they are younger – and they are often on the road to take part in an international art scene. The Edith Russ Site for Media Art work stipend awards each artist 10,000 Euro over six months and requires the artists come into contact with the local public.⁷

An especially relevant example was Dave Allen's stipend in 2003. Allen proposed an exchange project: If some local kids were willing to teach him how they make electronic music on their computers home, he would teach them what he knows about twentieth century experimental music. Through a youth club he found two 15 and 16-year-olds who spent a month of musical exchange with him. The short-term result was a performance by all three during at the opening of the exhibition for the 2003 stipend artists. Long term, each of the participants came away with new knowledge and a collective experience. Another positive aspect of the non-residency stipend is the fact that it does not discriminate against artists with children who may have difficulties being away from home for longer periods of time.

Production Network

The Oldenburg media art site is not specifically equipped for production. That said, in the past two years there actually has been a great deal of art produced there. This has been possible because of the team's flexibility in helping artists with whatever they need, but also in finding others in the area who can lend a helping hand. The 2004 solo exhibition with Monika Oechsler *At the Far and Farthest Point* is a case in point. Oechsler proposed making a sound installation with scripts, voice actors and by building a new interior space that would fit into the top floor of the exhibition hall. The artist brought the intellectual material – wrote the scripts, directed the voice actors – and many others from the community came together to make it happen.

A casting session was held in which actors from the Oldenburger Staatstheater tried out for the voice characters. The university provided time in their music department's sound studio (if they had had no open slots, the open access radio station was also willing to jump in and help) and the site's in-house technician mixed the recordings of the voices. Finally, local carpenters built the installation's crooked walls while students from the area's art schools worked with Oechsler to carefully paint the interior according to the color correspondence with the voices that would be heard. Each step of the production was accompanied by explanations, investigations and even small alterations by all participants. *At the Far and Farthest Point* turned into a true Oldenburg community project led by a visiting artist.

Listen to the artists. They know best.

It is often a struggle to meet the artist's needs. The finances for the best projector may not be available or moving a wall to where it needs be for a certain artwork may be very different for the technical team. It is tempting to talk the artist down, meaning negotiate using a video projector that is not as strong as desired, for instance. In the end, however, the work and the exhibition suffers for it. An example is Mark Lewis' video. His single-channel works are like large tableaux, rich like oil painting. They are supposed to be projected with a strong video projector onto a very large free-standing partition with a somewhat expensive and highly reflective white paint. It is tempting to call the artist a diva and cut corners: make the partition a little smaller, the paint a bit less white and the projector a lot cheaper. Also the placement of the work can be difficult. For the *Turbulent Screen* exhibition it was to be in-your-face close to the entrance, but this is not possible without a wide-angle lens. To tell the truth the curators contemplated cheating, but did end up doing everything according to the artist's wishes and it paid off as a highlight of the show. A few months later, Lewis' work was shown at another venue in a double projection with relatively inexpensive projectors and onto two very normal walls – no special attention whatsoever. It was

apparent that compromises had been made and the work suffered for it. What could have been a stunning visual experience turned into nothing more than a quick walk-through.

Success

If success were measured by visitor statistics alone media art institutions with intellectual content would be in trouble. In Oldenburg, few people want to just wander into an exhibition despite the fact that trained staff will help them with any challenging technical installations and give a spontaneous tour to those who would like guidance. Instead, they wait for events such as those described above.

Yet when those who are actually reached by a media art program through the alternative channels of television, radio, events, and interventions in the city such as showing artists video in empty storefront windows, then an incredible number of people are reached. The implication here is that the manner in which museum statistics are made – ticket sales and counting heads at openings – is not fit for a media art institution.

Putting numbers aside, it is difficult to measure success. For the staff at the Edith Russ Site, one unit of measurement is the time invested by people off the street who participate in an artist's talk. Another measurement of success is the fact that a great part of the visitors are quite young, something found at no other art institution in the area. Outreach is really working when people who would not otherwise take an interest in culture become repeat customers.

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¹ The author of this text has been director since April 2001.

² The concept was first published in the foreword of the first publication for the first Oldenburg exhibition by the author: Altstatt, Rosanne. *Avatars and Others*, Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Oldenburg and Frankfurt am Main, 2001, pp. 4-6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Contemporary Media Art*, 14 June 2001, Vuk Cošić: net art; 21 June 2001, Söke Dinkla: interactive art; 28 June 2001, Søren Grammel: video art, http://www.oldenburg.de/edith-russ-haus/german/medienkunst_.html, 10 June 2004.

⁵ *Avatars and Others*, 14 September – 4 November, 2001.

⁶ <http://www.oldenburg.de/edith-russ-haus/german/archiv.html#2002>, 10 June 2004.

⁷ Though this program is extremely successful, the funding is running out in 2004. New sponsors are being courted.