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published on netzspannung.org:
<http://netzspannung.org/positions/digital-transformations>
15 November 2004

First published: FLEISCHMANN, Monika, REINHARD, Ulrike (ed.):
Medienkunst als Schnittstelle von Kunst, Wissenschaft, Wirtschaft und
Gesellschaft. Heidelberg: Whois Verlags- und Vertriebsgesellschaft, 2004.



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Medienkommunikation

The Exploratory Media Lab
MARS Media Arts & Research Studies

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COMPUTER CULTURE IS A SOCIAL CULTURE – A PROMOTION CONCEPT BY MIGROS, A TRADITIONAL SWISS RETAILING COMPANY

Autumn 1998: The dotcom boom has also gripped Switzerland. Everyone is talking of technology and the internet. Technology trade shows are attended by record numbers of visitors, conferences on this topic abound, forecasts become outdated and are replaced with more promising projections almost immediately after they are announced and just about everyone is buying shares in technology stocks.

In a park near Zurich, a crane deposits a 20-foot shipping container on an immaculate lawn and a group of young activists in orange overalls busily moves about. But not to worry: the park is not being turned into a construction site. No, this is rather an artistic installation by the Swiss group etoy and is called “tank 10”. The young artists – they refer to themselves as agents – recently chosen to focus on the internet and apparently are now going to use this container as a mobile living and working unit.

This is a description of one of the first activities organized by the Migros cultural percentage in the area of New Media. Etoy’s tank installation in 1998 was not an isolated act, but was part of “playground”, a computer game event. “Playground” invited visitors of all ages to explore the world of digital games.

This digital playground was made possible by the Migros cultural percentage – the culture fund of the largest retail organization in Switzerland, Migros. Migros celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2000 and was founded by Gottlieb Duttweiler (1888 – 1962). Mr. Duttweiler started this company based on his idea of social capital, which goes far beyond retail trade and is still considered visionary today. The company’s contributions in the areas of culture, education and various social issues are set down in the statutes of the company, which was established as cooperative: Migros, “in the spirit of social capital without the intention of maximizing profits, aims to promote the economic, social and cultural ideals and interests of its members ... and the population at large.” The Migros cultural percentage disburses funds in the range of Euro 80 million annually. This makes Migros the largest private promoter of culture in Switzerland.¹⁾

The Migros cultural percentage is active in many areas: it organizes a pop music festival (“m4music”), a dance festival (“Steps”) and concerts with international symphony orchestras, promotes volunteer work, supports the integration of immigrants and owns and manages a museum of contemporary art. The Migros cultural percentage gives stipends to performers in dance, theatre and music and runs cultural offices to assist young artists. Every year thousands of applications are reviewed. The Migros cultural percentage can truly be designated a unique funding institution. During the last decades, it has had a lasting influence on Swiss culture.

To take a selective approach, provide important impulses, accept risk and still have a lasting effect – these are important aspects of the activities of the Migros cultural percentage. Today computers, internet and new technologies are an integral part of our culture and daily life. The fields of application of the new media lie in the realm of communication and thus directly to the cultural sphere of man. The computer enables us to find new means of expression; computer culture is a culture in the process of creation.

The integration of “etoy tank 10” described above was the beginning of an in-depth undertaking of the Migros cultural percentage with interactive media. This involvement in interactive media was initiated without a clearly defined concept but rather the aim of opening up a new field of activity, as well as to experience, and to enable, the learning processes.

To attain its goals, the Migros culture percent has developed a number of different funding models: the development of Migros projects, cooperation with other partners, and financial contributions to third-party projects.

Migros projects 1:
Computer games as initiators

The diametrical opposition of the Fascination with computer games on the one hand and sceptical adults on the other hand provided the initial impulse for the activities of “playground”²⁾. At first, the objective of this project was to provide insights into the fantasy worlds of computer games and, within a secondary program, to exhibit artistic approaches to the subject. The presentation of such artistic approaches has become gradually more important over the years. In 2000, the STEIM laboratory of Amsterdam participated in the project. For 25 years, STEIM has been developing experimental interfaces for artists and musicians. In a show called “playground touch” the Dutch exhibited their unusual inventions with such fantastic names as “crackle box”, “magic organ”, “net” or “sound table”. In two concerts musicians from the whole world demonstrated that these inventions can really be used to play music.
www.playground-touch.ch

Workshops are an effective way to acquaint people of all ages with complex topics; they are often better suited than exhibits. Based on these thoughts, a program was developed in the summer of 2002 in the areas bordering on both the arts and science that consisted only of workshops. Themes of this “playground summer school” were: chaos in theory and practice, enciphering/deciphering with the legendary enigma machine, production of lego movies, analogue and digital robotics or a playful introduction to the principles of artificial life.³⁾
www.playground-summerschool.ch

Migros projects 2:
The ThinkQuest competition: an internet project for youngsters

Even though many expectations of e-learning will prove to be utopic visions, it is nevertheless certain that the internet will play an important role in education in the very near future. To promote the use of the internet in school and the daily life of the young generation, the Migros cultural percentage joined the international ThinkQuest competition in 1998 and developed a Swiss version of the competition simultaneously. ThinkQuest is a socio-cultural project. It shows to what extent computer culture has an impact on communication. Today ThinkQuest is well known among high-school students in Switzerland. Almost 2000 students have participated in the competition since 1998 – and have created more than 350 new web sites.⁴⁾

The prize winning projects of 2003 are of very high quality: A team of girls produced a site on particle physics and called their playful approach to the topic “particle zoo”. Two young homosexuals created a website on homosexuality describing their coming-out experience.
www.thinkquest.ch

Cooperation projects 1: Digital Brainstorming

“Digital brainstorming” is a cooperative project. It is based on the desire to create a platform to present ideas, performances and lectures. Within the first two years a number of exceptional people renowned for their contributions to technology, the arts and music participated: for example, the Australian media artist Stelarc, Seymour Papert of the MIT Media Lab or Rudolf Frieling of the German Center for Art and Media ZKM Karlsruhe. From the start, contributions from Swiss personalities were also important. Musician Bruno Spoerri from Zurich was responsible for a series of concerts called “white noise” ; Bruno Spoerri is a Swiss pioneer of electronic music and one of the first-prize winners of Ars Electronica.

In order to widen the geographic scope of “digital brainstorming”, the lecture series was reorganized in 2002 as a network of several partners. Now local partners are responsible for organizing and realizing a performance and the Migros cultural percentage reimburses the performers and manages the advertising for the events. Partners in the network are several organizations active in the media arts in Switzerland: the “Kornhausforum” in Berne, the “plug in

“in Basle, the urban culture center “Altes Spital” in Solothurn, the Institute for digital culture (IDK), or the “Kunstraum Walcheturm” in Zurich.
www.digitalbrainstorming.ch

Cooperation projects 2: The university project “MetaWorx”

For several years now, an active exchange of ideas has been taking place with the Swiss art schools, especially with respect to their new curricula in media art and interactive media. These schools play an important, but so far not widely recognized, role in Switzerland, as they are the only institutions dedicated to training and research in these areas. The wider public is hardly aware of the innovative work initiated at these schools. For this reason “MetaWorx”, a cooperation project was started in 2002. “MetaWorx” is a platform open to all Swiss universities offering programs in media art and interactive media. Works of art from these schools were shown to the public for the first time in 2003 at the Viper Festival in Basle. The exhibit consisted of a catalog, a DVD, a net platform and - as special attraction – two shiny silver “Airstream” trailers from the fifties.⁵⁾
www.metaworx.info

Financial contributions to projects

Financial contributions to projects play an important role in the policy of the Migros cultural percentage. Financial contributions are also made to new media projects according to relatively simple guidelines and at small administrative expense. Contributions are made to festivals, workshops exhibits and publications or more generally spoken to the presentation of artistic approaches; occasionally also to the creation of media art productions. Thus, the Migros cultural percentage has been supporting for several years now the youth competition “Freestyle Computing” of the Viper media art festival as well as the recently initiated Dialog Festival in Winterthur, which is also dedicated to media art. Among the single installations supported by the Migros cultural percentage are the internet platform “micromusic” (www.micromusic.net).

Networks are important

What is the significance of the above-mentioned activities, apart from the fact that they have something to do with computer culture and new media? None of these activities happen by themselves, but take place through social interaction. New activities in computer culture can be traced back to communication media – the computer and the internet. This is essentially why they must be considered social activities.

It may come as a surprise that the annual budget for all the activities described here is only Euro 200'000. The reason for this can be found in the inter-connectedness of these activities which do not exist independently but rather form one synergetic entity. This implies that an artist receiving financial contributions from the Migros cultural percentage today may be a guest in “digital brainstorming” tomorrow and possibly the main attraction in “playground” the day after tomorrow.

September 2003: The dotcom boom is over. The economies of Europe and also Switzerland are in recession. A group of artists and scientists attend a meeting in the pilgrim’s hostel of the medieval monastery in Romainmôtier in the hills of the Swiss Jura. They are not interested in neoconservative ideas, as the traditional surroundings might suggest. They have rather come together to develop and discuss artistic projects and ideas in robotics. There is talk of flower pots moving autonomously, of a robot skeleton, 3D animations, of the potential of a high-speed network or an artistic approach to artificial intelligence. During their discussions, a strange vehicle moves across the floor – it is investigating the surroundings and transmitting video images.

Digital culture is still in the process of creation. People continue to work and experiment. By the way: the pilgrim's hostel in medieval Romainmôtier is an installation of the Migros cultural percentage as was the project in the park near Zurich mentioned at the beginning of this article .

About the author

Dominik Landwehr was born in Zurich in 1958. When a boy, he built rocket cars, radio transmitters and hot air balloons. He holds a master degree in German literature and cultural studies. Between 1985 and 1997 he worked as a journalist and editor for radio, television and newspapers. Since 1998 he manages the "Science & Future" division of the Migros cultural percentage in Zurich with projects in the new media, computer culture and pop music.

www.peshawar.ch
www.kulturprozent.ch

Translation Susanna Landwehr-Sigg.

Annotations

Most publications are in German language. They are nevertheless listed here.

¹ Girschik, Katja et al.: Der Migros Kosmos. Zur Geschichte eines aussergewöhnlichen Schweizer Unternehmens. Zürich 2003.

² Landwehr, Dominik; Zehnder Matthias (Hg.) : Spielzeug Computer. Ein Führer durch den elektronischen Spielplatz. Solothurn 1998.
Landwehr, Dominik: Digital und interaktiv. Computerspiele sind die Unterhaltung von morgen. Erschienen in: gdi_impuls. Oktober 2000.

³ Landwehr, Dominik (Hg.). Playground Robotics. Das Hamburger Robotic-Kunst Institut f-18 und seine Schweizer Freunde. Basel 2004.

⁴ Landwehr, Dominik: „Das fliegende Klassenzimmer im Cyberspace. Das Internet als Lernmedium. Neue Zürcher Zeitung vom 29.Oktober 1999.

⁵ Bühlmann, Vera: Approaches to Interactivity. Metaworx. Young Swiss Interactive. Basel 2003.