

Lioudmila Voropai

## **Institutionalisation of Media Art in the Post-Soviet Space: The Role of Cultural Policy and Socioeconomic Factors**

In a strict sense, we can start speaking about “Media Art” only with the appearance of an institutional network which started to develop in the mid 80s and comprised the diverse festivals, research centres, educational facilities etc., which have been programmatically associated with “Media Art”. Due to certain discourse-economical and organisational reasons the concept “Media Art” as such has become a sort of *terminus generalis*, which is supposed to signify the whole variety of art forms involving the New Media: like „Net Art“, „Computer Art“, „Interactive Art“ and so on.

Therefore, the working definition of “Media Art” used in this paper is the following: Media Art is a complex of artistic activities taking place in an institutional Media Art context and/or defined as “Media Art” by the actors themselves.

Another important remark should be made concerning the title of this paper. It wouldn't be, of course, possible in this short talk to overview an institutionalisation of Media Art in all the former republics of the Soviet Union, so I will confine myself to its analysis in Russia as the biggest and the most representative part of the so called Post-Soviet Space.

As Adorno noticed in his grand and merciless manner, in the 1960 article “Culture and Administration”: “to speak of culture is to speak of administration, whether one wants or not”.<sup>1</sup> The logic behind this is simple: as a minor and merely dependent part of the entire capitalist system, culture and cultural production require money, which must be invested in some way, but the very structure of an investment in late capitalism implies an institutional framework, both on the side of the investors and the invested in.

Initially, almost all the artists and activists working with new media programmatically proclaimed an anti-institutional attitude. They wanted to be an informal alternative to the ‘official’ art world. However, this more than attractive and understandable anti-institutional pathos always, sooner or later, will encounter its time limit, which means the beginning of a professionalisation process in its particular field of activity. Of course, ‘professionalism’ doesn't imply any question of quality here. The strict sociological understanding of the term implies simply providing for oneself, that is, earning one's living through a particular activity.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, Kultur und Verwaltung, Gesammelte Schriften Band 8, S. 122.

Already Max Weber, in his classical work “Economy and Society”, pointed a close relation out, between the processes of professionalisation and bureaucratisation<sup>2</sup>. Bureaucracy, as a modern rational form of rule and administration, implies institutions as a scene, where this rational administration can be carried out. Institutionalisation becomes a side effect of professionalization and vice versa, so that they take on a strange dialectic relationship: there is no profession without its institution and there is no institution without professions. Alas, “Media Art” could not escape this matrix.

From the earliest moments in the history of its institutionalisation, media art has claimed its socio-cultural ‘added value’, by positioning itself as the vanguard of “creative exploration in the New Media”, an advance which goes beyond the borders of mere artistic practice. It was intended to become a sort of socially useful field of experimentation, in which “art, science and technology” could be integrated.

Such an ‘ideological superstructure’ actually corresponded to the ‘economic base’ of rather costly media art production, which from the beginning implied a high potential in Media Art for instrumentalisation.

This strategy of claiming socio-cultural value was not only successful, but also proved quite prudent. This is because the traditional idea of art as a pure “wastage” in Bataille’s sense, no matter whether in the classical, modernist or postmodernist paradigm, was now no longer compatible with the spirit of the brave new neo-liberalism, which expects from everything, first of all, an efficiency.

Due to the economic boom of the 90s and the overwhelming enthusiasm for new computer technologies, Media Art became in the West a rewarding pursuit for massive investments, on the part of both state and corporate cultural-political actors. These investments enabled a rapid emergence of the institutional field, which from the beginning was characterised by a certain conceptual discrepancy. On the one hand, Media Art intended to be integrated as a subsystem into the art system. On the other hand, its discourse of legitimisation – i.e. Media Art is “more than just art” – led to its actual ‘art qualities’ being sacrificed to endless technological ‘try-outs’ and experiments. With the result, that Media Art has obtained an image of being “insufficient” art. This image tended to put Media Art in a marginal position vis-à-vis common art institutions and make it strongly dependent on non-mandatory, event-based financial support from private foundations and corporate sponsorship programs.

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<sup>2</sup> See Max Weber: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der Verstehenden Soziologie*. 5. Auflage, hrsg. von Johannes Winckelmann, Tübingen 1980.

Media art in the former Soviet Union, which was in a way an “imported project”, was only a small side-trip in the history of the media art in the West. What was much more essential for its development is that it was a part of the more general process of the institutionalisation of all contemporary art in the Post-Soviet context. It developed at a time when the previous state art system was undergoing drastic structural transformations, so that, in the emergent vacuum of cultural policy new forms of organisation and financing of art had to appear.

The first steps on this path had been initiated by the art community itself, as had also happened in the West in the 60ies and 70ies, in a common, “grassroots” form. The first galleries and art centres emerged usually on the basis of squats, artist’s studios and the like. Behind this process stood a long tradition of the so-called “Apt-Art”, i.e. of apartment exhibitions common among the Soviet unofficial art scene.

Everything had the character typical for this sort of non-formalised and non-structured hanging-out, an event-party-atmosphere, where all these activities, mostly in small circles of friends, were slowly merging in and out of each other and transforming. So it is often not possible to differentiate a performance from a get-together, or a lecture from a common kitchen talk. All the events had an absolute no-budget character and the very idea of earning money out of these artistic and para-artistic activities was absurd.

The first major attempt to institutionalise, in a western sense, ‘ex-communist’ contemporary art was an undertaking by the Open Society Institute/Soros Foundations Network. Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) were founded in 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The SCCAs in Moscow and St. Petersburg were opened in 1993.

The SCCA Bulletin 1991-1994 defines the aims and activities of the Soros Centres in the following manner: “The SCCA is a network of offices devoted to the development of local arts communities by organizing exhibitions, documenting the work of local artists, awarding small grants, and promoting educational programs. Soros Centers for Contemporary Art work with each other and with other arts organizations to promote contemporary art in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. The SCCA organizes and assists various international exchange programs for artists and art students as well as lectures, symposia dealing with international contemporary art topics and local educational, theoretical and practical issues. [...] Grants are made available to local artists and institutions in priority areas

according to the local needs in each country. The SCCA Board is responsible for selecting the grantees.”<sup>3</sup>

The SCCA network, like any other institutional formation, could not avoid the continuous conflict between macro-political agendas and micro-political interferences in the process of their realisation. It often became an object of strong and legitimate critique, both from outside and inside the network itself. In its lack of any articulated state cultural policy and financial support, the SCCA soon became monopolists on the empty market of cultural-political services.

Compare Stalin’s famous saying: “The cadres decide everything”. The SCCA was not an exception either; the splendours and miseries of the Soros Centres were also rooted in their recruiting policy and its consequences.

Being subdivisions of Open Society Institutes, the SCCA were not really functioning as open societies at all, but rather as closed shops for certain parts of local art communities, which was, for sure, very helpful for “club-members”. The latter often sincerely believed themselves to be the only representatives of contemporary arts in their countries. And ironically, this was even true sometimes.

Due to lack of time, I can only briefly refer here to three articles, whose authors bring to the point the most dubious moments in the activity of the Soros Centres. John Horvath in his article “The Soros Network” notes: “In order to work for Soros it appears that you have to be part of a clique. People within the Soros network seem to drift from organization to organization, not only within the same country but internationally as well. *Jobs are handed out on the basis of whom you know, not what you know.* Although most organizations follow transparency procedures for hiring, such as advertising for posts and conducting interviews, such procedures are mere formalities. Jobs are already decided in advance. Many people working within Soros organizations got their jobs by already knowing about openings months prior to them being made public.”<sup>4</sup> Calin Dan in “The Dictatorship of Good Will” mentions also “a team of women who’ve adopted courtship intrigue as a working style.”<sup>5</sup>

Geert Lovink in turn reflects on a perception of this situation within an art community itself, articulating both its psychological and factual consequences: “Turning your efforts into a corporation has some advantages, in terms of the possible redistribution of wealth, but is also producing envy, anger and resentment (for those who have to do it, and for those surrounding it), mainly because there is no acceptable alternative in sight. Friends turn into clients or

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<sup>3</sup> SCCA Bulletin 1991-1994, Budapest 1994, p. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> John Horvath, “The Soros Network”, Telepolis: <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/1/1094/2.html>

<sup>5</sup> Calin Dan, “The Dictatorship of Good Will”, Nettime, Ljubljana 1997, p. 41.

employees. There is no radical critique on cultural companies, only jealousy, bad feelings and old friendships being destroyed. The price of switching to other scales and circles, and possible 'success' (and some very temporary and virtual influence) is high. In most East European countries there is little to choose or contemplate about. There is still only one choice: Soros."<sup>6</sup>

An institutional policy is always a policy of exclusion, inevitably and naturally causing those excluded anger and resentment. It seems that there is no way to avoid it, because this is a purely structural problem of relative position in the coordinates of the system. Especially in a situation where everybody knows more or less the same stuff, the really decisive factor will be whom you know.

Any act of choice is a priori wrong and illegitimate viewed from the position of the not chosen one. Institutional decision-makers are 'bad guys' by definition. Being part of the structure, they are necessarily condemned to a 'bad guy' role. In the end, institutional decisions are made not by individuals, but by purely functional elements of the system, which these individuals embody. The system can function only as long as the functional factor in an individual exceeds a human one. As soon as structural elements of the system become human, all too human, the system collapses.

Maybe it was due to this human aspect, besides other political and economic reasons, that the SCCA system in the Former Soviet Union had collapsed by the end of the 90ies. They simply never achieved Weber's ideal of rational bureaucratic administration, being trapped in this excess of the human over the functional.

In one of his interviews from those times George Soros sadly remarked: "The foundations had to become more professional. It is a change I have had difficulty accepting. In the beginning I wanted to have an anti-foundation foundation and for a time I succeeded."

Indeed, a bourgeois concept of charity does have certain limits, which do not necessarily include giving project grants to artists, in order for them to manufacture, for instance, new teeth, with the argumentation that a contemporary Russian artist needs proper teeth to successfully present his art and country abroad. Alexander Shaburov, a member of the artist group "Blue Noses", will tell you this story with great pleasure. One can find many more such anecdotes.

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<sup>6</sup> Geert Lovink, "The Art of Being Independent: On NGOs and the Soros Debate", *Nettime*, Ljubljana 1997, p. 17.

Luckily, despite, or due to, the peculiarities of the SCCA local recruitment policy, there were always enough people among its employees and Board-members, who had both a healthy sense of humour and strong sympathy for the real existential needs of artists in the early post-soviet phase. Because all members of the ex-soviet art community were in the same boat: all having huge difficulties understanding why art and culture have to suddenly take the role of poor beggars. Especially understanding why exactly those people, who had effectively made them all newly bankrupt, should now be glorified as the great benefactors of art, for doling out to the artists crumbs of the cake, of which they were recently deprived.

An important aspect of the SCCA policy in ex-socialist countries was to support and develop art dealing with new technologies. In regions where only a small minority of the population had access to those technologies it was an anything but simple task.

Computer technology in the Soviet Union was intended to serve military, industrial and scientific purposes, but not the individual user. Moreover, with the war in Afghanistan in 1980, the West put an embargo on export computer technologies into the USSR; so Soviet computer science was forced into isolation, handicapping its development.

The idea of a personal computer hardly existed. Even by the beginning of the 90ies, personal computers were uncommon. They were unaffordable for a normal individual. Especially for the younger generation, computers became a status symbol, a 'cool' item per se, like an almighty mythical machine.

That is why in such a context it became almost a commonplace in certain circles to make jokes about the Soros conspiracy. Someone who initialises this PR-company for the new media, in order to later become the monopolist on the market of IT-technologies in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union. Whereby art is once more proven the best and most long-lasting propaganda tool.

One important remark has to be made here regarding the use of the term "media art" in Russia at the beginning of the 90ies. Media art as a term for long time was used as the synonym for video art. Video as an artistic medium in the soviet and post-soviet situation had no great tradition either, on similar technological, or rather technologically lacking grounds. But it was at least more familiar to the art community, due to its role in western art. In addition, it was also a lot easier for a not particularly technically advanced artist to start working with a video camera than with some 3-d animation software. By 1993 there already existed a couple of galleries in Moscow, which dealt with video art. For instance, "TV-Gallery" or "XL-Gallery".

But the history of video art in Russia is not my current subject, so I will concentrate on events where the term New Media Art was used in a more specific sense.

The first step for an institutional establishment of media art in Russia was made in 1993 when at the SCCA in Moscow founded the New Media Art Laboratory. Initially it was meant to be a sort of educational centre provided with the necessary computer and Hi-8 video equipment. An activity of the Media Art Lab, led by Alexei Isaev and Olga Shishko, resulted in a series of events, comprising a course of lectures in theory and practice of new media, held from February to November 1994, the international symposium “NewMediaLogia. The artist in the world of new technologies: Ways and results of interaction” (November 1994), and an exhibition “NewMediaTopia” in the Central House of Artists in Moscow (November-December 1994) curated by Vladimir Levashov, who also was an assistant director of the SCCA Moscow; and finally a catalogue with a full documentation of all the listed events, which today is probably the only source of information about this early phase in the development of Russian media art. But strangely the whole project has something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. New media art as a project emerged in Moscow precisely in the context of these events.

The exhibition “NewMediaTopia” has revealed the main peculiarity of freshly emergent Russian New Media Art – an obvious discrepancy between the conceptual pretensions of artworks and the level of their technical realisation. This gap between an adequate theoretical elaboration and the aesthetical helplessness, and even backwardness, of the exhibited projects, at least from the perspective of international media art practice of that time, was perfectly clear to the curator of the exhibition. “An avant-garde position of media-art directly depends on technology, and therefore, on money and the “movement” social status. From the very beginning it lacks immunity, that degree of individual independence and asociality, which had conceptualist artists, who, at the worst, could work with a sheet of paper and a pencil, or a typewriter. Media artists have to be a part of the social environment of business and bureaucracy, mass media and advertising, the industry of entertainment, which could need these artists and allot to them part of their own possibilities and privileges.”<sup>7</sup>

And this is precisely what was missing in the post-soviet media art context. You cannot establish a tradition and produce relevant media art works at the appropriate technical level

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<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Levashov, „The Concept of Media-Topia. Curator’s Irresponsible Fantasies“, in NewMediaLogia/NewMediaTopia, Moscow 1994, p. 148.

without proper equipment, corresponding training and technical and programming support, merely by heroic efforts of just a couple of very small institutions and a bunch of activists. You cannot compare the artistic productions of single individuals, in a field of such technologically demanding media art forms as the interactive installation, with the productions of such monster institutions as the ZKM or the V\_2, where for the realisation of a single project a whole staff of programmers, engineers and technicians could be put to work. Even granting that the conceptual components of these projects were often sacrificed to their technical perfection.

That's also why the only segment of media art practice, in which Russian artists did play a significant role was no-budget Net Art. This didn't require the latest hi-tech devices or up-to-date computers and software, or very profound programming skills, but rather simply witty ideas, critical reflection of the medium and its artistic limits and possibilities, as well as a theoretical flair.

Therefore later Russian media art institutions, also reflecting their limits and possibilities, but rather technical and financial ones, have concentrated their activity on media and art theory, Net Art and other Internet based projects.

I'll only mention here a couple of the oldest, well-known Russian Net Art projects: "Moscow-WWW-Art-Lab" initiated in 94 by Alexei Shulgin; the festival of Russian Internet art resources "Da-Da-Net" held in Moscow in 1998 and 1999; or the Internet-festival "Trash-Art" (1999).

Also important for a history of Russian media art was the Gallery 21, which was founded in St. Petersburg in 1994 and located at the famous Pushkinskaya 10, a former squatted house, turned into an art centre with several art galleries, museums, concert venues, clubs and studios for artists and musicians. (The concept of Pushkinskaya 10 is quite similar to Kunsthaus Tacheles in Berlin.)

The Gallery 21 from the very beginning was conceived of as a non-profit venture dealing with experimental art and media projects as well as multidisciplinary theoretical projects, initiated by the curator Irina Aktuganova, the media and art critic Alla Mitrofanova and the artist and curator Dimitrij Pilikin.

In 1995, associated with the gallery, the Techno-Art-Centre was opened, which was aimed more specifically at promotion and presentation of New Media Art. In 1996 the Techno-Art-Centre in turn became a base for the Cyber-Femin-Club, which dealt with cyber-feminism and



other gender/media related issues. In 1998 at the Cyber-Femin-Club the Internet-Centre was opened for women providing public Internet access and a variety of seminars and workshops. Finally, in 1999, the Techno-Art-Centre initiated the Gallery for Experimental Sound (GEZ 21).

In the period between 1994 and 2001, Gallery 21 and related projects organised more than 200 exhibitions, seminars and lectures on contemporary art. Due to the numerous international contacts of the Gallery 21 organisers, established through regular participation in various collaborative projects, festivals and conferences, the activities of the gallery were well represented in the western media art context and also partly supported by some West European media art institutions and foundations. For instance, by V\_2 or by Mama Cash and Apex Foundations. I will mention only some of the international projects, in which the Gallery 21 organisers took part: "Stubnitz Tour" (Rostock, St.Petersburg, Helsinki, Hamburg 1994), (the International Symposium on Electronic Arts (ISEA), the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival (DEAF), the V2\_East Meeting (Rotterdam 1996), Ostranenie (1997 Bauhaus Dessau), «Beauty & The East» (Ljubljana 1997) and others.

An encounter with an institutionalised and well-funded western media art system was quite traumatic for Russians with their technically backward and poor media art production. In an interview from 1997, Irina Aktuganova describes her impressions from visiting DEAF'96: "I had the feeling that the "electronic" scene had changed a great deal. The intellectual freedom had vanished; hierarchies and, consequently, careerists had emerged. The pragmatists and businessmen had arrived. The establishment had caught up with us. Besides, when I saw what Western cultural organizations do with the powerful support of various foundations, I became miserable. It's senseless for us to compete with them in terms of technical potentials - yeah, in general there's no reason to do so."<sup>8</sup>

This was not only a natural human reaction to the usual developments of initially revolutionary projects, but also on an adequate and realistic vision of one's own perspectives, and thus the perspectives of media art in the whole region.

"The previous, event-based policy, in which something had to happen in the gallery every week, has exhausted itself. ... Since after a number of big projects we ran up against the fact there is no cultural infrastructure, it became clear that in order to exist in a civilized manner and turn out, at very least, some kind of artefacts, one needs money. But there isn't any money, and the elementary problem of survival arises. And so it's already not the organization

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<sup>8</sup> Post-Information Utopia, Nettime, Ljubljana 1997, p. 58.

of exhibitions that you're busy with, but the search for funds, foundations; you engage in politics, public relations, you "get chummy" with somebody.”

“Do you have any kind of hope for the future of Pushkinskaya 10?” – asks an interviewer. “If some sort of monstrous cataclysm doesn't happen, then most likely we'll end up with an ordinary, civil cultural center of the Western type, and we'll be offered jobs here as hired workers. But this will no longer have any relationship to the actualities of the present.”<sup>9</sup>

However neither monstrous cataclysm have occurred nor have they ended up an ordinary, civil cultural centre of the Western type. In 1999 Soros winded up his cultural and art program in Russia. According to the official OSI version: “In 1999 and 2000, following the restructuring of the Soros foundations, all Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts started to become independent and ultimately transformed into non-governmental organizations.”<sup>10</sup> In practice, this meant that previous financing of the SCCA in St. Petersburg, which was the main subsidizer of the Gallery 21, was stopped, and the problem of survival really arrived.

Unluckily, the advent of the so-called ‘Post-Soros Era’ in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has strangely coincided with the end of the “Golden Age” for New Media Art in the West as well. The very term “New Media Art” didn’t sound new anymore, or ‘sexy’ enough to seduce state or corporate cultural-political actors to invest. Especially in conditions where the economic boom of the 90ies was over, and first signs of gradually invading economic crisis were revealed. However, due not least to the awkwardness and inflexibility of the Western European state bureaucratic system, which cannot easily get rid of its existing institutions, with all the working places involved, western media art organisations which were already established did keep on getting support.

But most of the Eastern European art institutions, continuing the habit of the last ten years, kept on expecting the help from the West, not realising that the problem of survival had became a problem they had in common, simply on a different scale.

Economic growth in recent years in Russia has led to an appearance of an internal art market, albeit a quite specific and rudimentary one; and also to the establishment of several state and private institutions for contemporary art.

For some Russian and other ex-Soviet nouveau-riches, who have learned les règles du jeu in the western business world, and realised the significance of symbolic capital, contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/arts/about/history\\_full](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/arts/about/history_full)

art has become an important status symbol. It is quite the newest fashion today in Russia to collect contemporary art and to open private museums and foundations.

However, Media Art, which has nothing to look for in the art market, and which by definition remains an institutional art, is hardly affected. But also for today's state cultural-political actors and their advisers, Media Art is an obsolete concept from the 90ies, which at the moment cannot be supported as such. It can be only supported either in the context of the newest art history research or museums projects, or in an art educational context, such as teaching how to use new technologies in contemporary art practice.

These days in Russia, it's not easy to find an artist who would explicitly call himself a media artist. Those from the old media art guard who didn't completely sink from the art scene into advertising agencies, TV productions and so on, continue to produce artworks, which do not need the label "media art" to be sold at the art market.

Many of those works would, of course, automatically turn into Media Art, as soon as they were presented in an institutional media art context. But the context itself is just not there in Russia. And sometimes you can even get a strange feeling that "Media Art", as such, is simply a by-product of the context existing here in the West.