

Ecomedia. Ecological Strategies in Today's Art

(Ökomedien. Ökologische Strategien in der Kunst heute)

Based on a foundation, the Edith-Ruß-Haus focuses on art related to new media technologies. Located in downtown Oldenburg, Germany, it offers 300 m² of exhibition space on two floors.

The current exhibition "Ecomedia" examines ecological aspects of our time in terms of social, political and scientific relevance. With renewed interest in global warming at the latest these issues attract much public attention. But the goals of the exhibition curated by Sabine Himmelsbach, Karin Ohlenschläger and Yvonne Volkart are not limited to a mere technical interpretation. Rather, they chose works with a strong relation to the topic itself instead of simply working with formal references. Many works come along with an internet project. In the web2.0 decade it is frequently community-based and can be used right there in the exhibition hall at a computer terminal. In the project "F.R.U.I.T" by artist group Free Soil for example we may generate virtual plants that we can combine with a (hopefully) ecological slogan.

Roughly, we can distinguish three groups of exhibits. First, we have some projects related to activism or documentation. They point their fingers at problematic ecological issues, make details of these visible, try to create transparency and sometimes show alternatives. The already mentioned Free Soil trace the different routes that oranges are transported on during their way from the plantation to the consumer. In times of globalisation these add up to a long and wasteful way. The artist collaboration Transnational Temps delivers in their quite complex work "EcoScope" an internet discussion platform for different ecological topics. The viewer can create an avatar and join the debate. It's a playful frontend, but it is clearly structured and aesthetically appealing at the same time. Less activist, more narrative is "MILKProject" by Ester Polak and Auzina Rixc (Riga). Using GPS transmitters they tracked down the ways of people that participate in the production of milk: farmers, truckers, wholesale dealers, vendors. Transcriptions of their conversations tell us about the efforts in the chains of global production and delivery. All these works have an obvious statement to put across.

The second group of artworks is less obvious in its message. These works use subtle, suggestive overtones. Insa Winkler shows a video of her domestic pig project ("Eichelschwein-Projekt"). For several years she followed her enterprise, bought 10 pigs and raised them in free nature guided by ecological principles. However, the documentation doesn't burden the viewer with a plethora of details. Rather, she exemplifies - in sometimes poetic, sometimes funny scenes - an alternative way of living with the animals. But this, of course, cannot become a blueprint for everyone, thus the work is not actually "educational". The message in MVRDV's work appears to be much clearer at first glance. The group of architects show a project sketch of a gigantic tower to be used for intensive pig farming exclusively. The computer animation leaves no doubt about the aims of their idea. But in the context of the exhibition, the whole absurdity of the problem they tackle becomes clear: combining intensive farming with keeping the pigs appropriate to their species results in a grotesque conceptual design. They don't really want this, do they? You never know.

The most generic media artwork of all uses an electronic input signal and transforms it to some kind of unusual visualisation – this is our 3rd group of works. "Grower" by Sabina Raaf measures the CO₂ concentration of the air, a little robot paints green blades of grass with corresponding height on the wall. Franz John, however, uses tectonic data of earth's crust which are transformed to sound and vibration. These works impress because they stay close to their subject and thus exceed plain visual novelty.

Taken as a whole, "Ecomedia" is an interesting exhibition, nicely presented and deserving more attention. The brief but informative texts that come along with the artworks are very helpful to get into the subject matter. Inconsistencies in artistic positions are not concealed but put up for discussion. Tea Mäkipää, for instance, requests us not to buy stuff we don't really need – but this statement is presented on some hip iMac computer. We blame the toys, but like to play anyway. The viewers are affected by this, as well – in the guestbook we read "I want an iMac, too!"

Pascal Unbehaun talked to Barbara Filser (Edith-Ruß-Haus für Medienkunst)

PU: Edith-Ruß-Haus is all about media art. What is your definition of "media"?

BF: This term refers to "new" media like video, computers... electronically generated sound, too.

PU: The Edith-Ruß Haus is a unique kind of museum. Is it accepted well by Oldenburg's cultural scene?

BF: It is, indeed. We have, if I may say so, a different target group as other museums. For instance, our shows are attended by a younger audience.

PU: There are many group shows, is that correct?

BF: Curator Sabine Himmelsbach tries to organize many group shows, that's true. We have maybe 4 or 5 projects per year and about two are group shows. But there are solo shows, too, to present singular positions of individual artists.

PU: How are the topics of your exhibitions decided on?

BF: Especially with the group shows we rely on our focus on media art. Often we look at the impact some new technology has on different areas.

PU: In the current exhibition there are works that take electronic signals to transform them into some sort of visualization. Would you say this kind of art is somewhat formalistic since it relies on a more or less simple principle of production?

BF: I don't think so. Talking about the three works that fit your description we have different characteristics. Sabrina Raaf makes things visible, using scientific data. Franz John's work is about sound compositions and feeling "tectonic" vibration. The strongest message, maybe, has Inigo Manglano Ovalles with "You don't need a Weatherman". But I'm referring to our exhibition now. Generally speaking, this is a legitimate question.

PU: Talking about visualisation, my impression is that the artists somehow construct a reality of their own. Scientifically, these strategies of visualisation are arbitrary. But the artists have nevertheless an activist approach and claim their works to be a documentation of the real. Is this a contradiction to you?

BF: I wouldn't see it only black and white, the notion of the documentary is problematic. Any documentation is fictional, too. It's a matter of how the strategy of visualisation looks like, eventually. Sure, you could accuse "grower" of being casual in its approach because of the green grass, but to me it still makes sense. Visualisations are used in natural sciences, too, and all of these are constructed. So we could mirror back this accusation. I believe it is legitimate to mediate matters. It's another thing if this is used as a basis to draw further conclusions from it.

PU: Are there works that somehow go beyond the subject of "ecomedia", maybe raising formal questions?

BF: That is something I like about Andrea Polli's work, that she uses the vocabulary of experimental film. The internet projects though are more activist.

PU: In "10 Commandments" we get some practical advice: Don't buy anything you don't really need. But there are a lot of lifestyle products here in the exhibition.

BF: Well that's mostly from our standard inventory...

PU: ...and the artists deliver only the software. But I also mean it metaphorically. Don't they criticize what they like to have?

BF: You can't turn back the clock. A complete "back to nature" will not be realized. In "Pig City" we see that we cannot do without intensive farming, but the point is how we do it. It is clearly an economical project, and it's uncertain whether it can be carried out or if it's desirable at all. It is maybe ironic, looking at two subjects: economy and "happy" animals.

PU: Edith-Ruß-Haus seems to have a strong focus on art mediation.

BF: Depending on the project and funding. We are a small team and have to buy external services. Here, it

was our strong concern especially reach the schools. As municipal institution we are of course obliged to art mediation. Group shows are good projects to show this.

PU:What's up next?

BF: We are preparing a show "Just play" about the crossover of art and music.

PU: A loud exhibition I guess!

BF: Probably...

Curators: Sabine Himmelsbach, Karin Ohlenschläger, Yvonne Volkart

Opening Hours

Tue-Fri 14-17

Sat-Sun 11-17

Admission

2,50 / 1,50 EUR

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