Political
Interventions

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Edition Digital Culture 1

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Mere

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A simple figure painted blue on a white wall is formed by a dot followed by three ascending arcs. Under the dot, an Arab word[1] is painted in black together with the sentence "qaul.net". Recurring elements of our visual culture, the styled motif, and the words immediately remind us of a wireless network and an Internet address. Hence, the painting has a clear informative and practical function, it directs the viewer to an Internet website. But the picture is not simply an advertising for a website, it is a tool, a statement, and yet again it is a painting. Furthermore, the image has

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1   The Arab word "qaul" refers to the concepts of execution, statement, speech, word, and saying.

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not been depicted on simply any wall, it was painted on an exhibition wall inside the OK Center for Contemporary Art in Linz, Austria, during the Ars Electronica Festival. The authors of the stencil painting, which is part of a larger project, are the Swiss artists Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud, winners in 2012 of the Prix Ars Electronica / The Next Idea, a prize awarded in recognition of innovative works in art and technology.

The work "qaul.net", with this stencil painting and presented in the context of the festival exemplifies the complex frame in which the activity of the artists has to be considered. The picture on the wall evokes images of political activism and urban guerrillas, yet it is located in a defined artistic context and for a specific audience. It is an artwork, but it is also a promotional sign, part of a real open source program that can be used effectively. The picture is a message, a tool, and yet again a painting: these three aspects are all inherent in one and the same work.

...but Is It Art?

Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud create works that function like practical tools, it is not uncommon that many observers stand puzzled in front of their works. Process oriented approaches in art were common throughout the 20th century, from the dada period up to the works associated with the controversial 'ésthétique rélationelle' introduced by the French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud.[2] In the field

2   Bourriaud, Nicolas: Esthétique relationnelle. Dijon 1998.

of media art, such strategies are even more common. However, what makes their work sometimes difficult to view as art, is the open source character of the software that they develop. If their tools can be further divulged, used, and modified, what distinguishes their works from other open source software that flourishes in the net and is shared by hackers and enthusiastic programmers? What exactly is the artistic distinction of their work?

Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud receive art prizes, benefit from artist's residences and subsidies, present their work in exhibition areas and at festivals and publish art catalogues. It would be easy to assume the institutional theory of art to support the hypothesis that they are contemporary artists. One of the most popular, and at the same time frustrating art theories of the second half of the 20th century, the institutional theory starts from the premise that it is impossible to define the concept of art with an exhaustive and all-embracing definition.[3] Hence, instead of searching for the intrinsic properties of a work of art, the theory turns to the context in which a work is produced, presented, and discussed in order to identify it as art.[4]

3   This thesis, which does not belong to the institutional theory of art but precedes it, has been proposed by Morris Weitz. See Weitz, Morris: The Role of Theory in Aesthetics. In: The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol. 15, no. 1 (1956), pp. 27–35.
4   In his famous article discussing the distinction between a real soap pads box and the one created by Andy Warhol, Arthur Danto outlines the fundamental ideas of the institutional theory of art. See Danto, Arthur: The Artworld. In: The Journal of Philosophy, vol. 61, issue 19 (1964), pp. 571 –584; www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/visual-arts/danto-artworld.pdf (accessed October 15, 2013).

The work of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud enters a specific artistic discussion that is characteristic of their time and field. Furthermore, something that has been discussed less about their work, it presents a peculiar aesthetic. The stencil painting of the work "qaul.net", the Internet pages associated with the works "picidae" and "New Nations", the roughly handcrafted and assembled wireless antennas in their installation "TOOLS FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION" and the documentary quality of the accompanying photographs were all produced with much diligence in their formal expression. On the one hand, they display a rather functional and minimal aesthetic, exempt from any unnecessary decorative element. On the other hand, they testify a very precise communication strategy that is particularly efficient in the context of media art. The universe at which the artists hint is one of political activism, social engagement, and civil disobedience. Nevertheless, to simply refer to the institutional theory and the analysis of the formal elements and aesthetic qualities of their artworks would not be sufficient to justify the interest and relevance of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud in an artistic context. It is essential, rather, to first consider their works as tools, then the theoretical context in which they are created and finally to appreciate the central discourse of the artists.

Destruction, Subversion, and Reconstruction in Media Art

Today, media art is a domain in its own right, within the field of art, that benefits from a dedicated theoretical discourse. More than anything, it is the use of media devices, from video recorders to mobile phones, that shaped the definition of media art, although most critical theorists would rather consider media artists as people who discuss these technologies in their work instead of merely using them.[5] This need for criticism and discourse was met by many artists such as Jodi, Etoy, and The Yes Men who gained international recognition at the turn of the century particularly for their rebellious and provocative actions and largely contributed to the reorientation of media art towards a more critical approach.

The work of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud is in the tradition of media art because of their distinctive use of technologies and, more particularly, because they engage in the theoretical discourse and criticism of these technologies that characterized the net-artists of the late nineties. Nevertheless, their purpose and their strategies differ greatly. The title of a series of three works "TOOLS FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION" couldn't be more appropriate. These works are genuine tools, mostly open source programs that have a practical function and could be effectively used to bypass Internet censorship "picidae", provide a new top-level domain "New Nations", and even create an alternative mesh network for people who cannot rely on commercial providers "qaul.net". Rather than manipulating and turning the tools against themselves or against powerful private corporations, the "TOOLS

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5 The establishment of media art is discussed, for example, by Geert Lovink. See Lovink, Geert: Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture. New York 2008.

FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION" focus on individuals and consumers, providing them with practical and useful instruments. Their work is not devoid of criticism, nonetheless: apart from offering actual alternatives to commercial solutions, the works aim at raising awareness of the condition of the digital society and our dependency on private corporations who are not only producing and selling electronic devices, but strongly influencing behavior associated with their use, creating software and brands dependencies, as well as influencing the laws regulating their consumption.[6]

In the works of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud, the concept of tool goes beyond the idea of open source software or a hacked electronic device. Works such as "HOTEL GELEM" and "~~BLACKLIST~~" are exemplary in this sense. "HOTEL GELEM" questions expectations and stereotypes, by offering the opportunity to spend some days in a Romani community, and allowing for a real exchange and confrontation. "~~BLACKLIST~~" on the other hand, by confronting the highly controversial question of illegal pornography and discriminating websites, not only reveals the existence of censorship in Switzerland, but also questions the pertinence of disrupting this very censorship in the name of total freedom. Both works bring the idea of tool to a more conceptual level. "~~BLACKLIST~~",

moreover, mounts a specific challenge to the field of art and its audience, which is usually accustomed to consuming works that tackle issues of copyright and censorship. Ultimately, and on a more subtle level, it confronts the question of the digital existence of images and their conservation. It challenges the responsibility of the government to process and register the very images that are being banned from public view.

Under the light of their many works, the idea of tool assumes a broader perspective: it becomes an opportunity, a challenge, and an invitation to confront the moral values and paradigms of our present society. In this respect, a paradigm that has been largely discussed in recent years and has a particular significance in the discussion of the work of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud, is certainly the paradigm of bio-power.

Bio-Power and Responsibility

Addressed by Michel Foucault[7] and later rediscussed by post-structuralist and neo-Marxist philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze,[8] Giorgio Agamben[9] or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,[10] for instance, the concepts of bio-power, bio-politics and the society of control have become central topics in the media art field. If today these concepts are mostly associated with bio-

6 Lessig, Lawrence: Free Culture. How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity. New York 2004. For a more general criticism of the globalization of culture, see Smiers, Joost: Arts under Pressure: Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization. London 2003.

7 Foucault, Michel: History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge. New York 1979.
8 Deleuze, Gilles: Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle. In: Pourparlers, 1972–1990. Paris 1990.
9 Agamben, Giorgio: Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita. Torino 1995.
10 Hardt, Michael / Negri, Antonio: Empire. Cambridge, Mass. 2000.

logical warfare, on the one hand, and bio-hacking on the other,[11] the discourse developed by the philosophers asserts how the contemporary capitalistic society is characterized by an increasing control of the private sphere by the authorities, who excessively extend their control and regulation to personal issues related to health, sexuality, and death.

The question of how the authorities, but also how the powerful private corporations manipulate, control, and regulate the private and intimate sphere of the individual is possibly the main concern of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud. Their aim is ultimately to question the laws, the forces, the relationships that condition our everyday life, and eventually to question the way we, in our digital era, are often ready to comply to the rules determined by these mechanisms. They confront the viewer with the factual reality of censorship of the Internet, the manifest impossibility of an undocumented migrant, a so called 'sans-papier', to sign a contract with a provider, or the many difficulties caused by the nonexistence of top level domains for communities such as the Tibetans, the Kurds, and the Tamils. Yet, it is not only the real problems of marginal communities that interest the artists, but rather the reflection on a broader level of political and cultural conditions that regulate the technologies today and their implementation in society. Considering the fact that our social relationships,

our access to information and our choice of products that we consume are strongly determined by the devices and the software that we use, it is not an exaggeration to say that our existence is strongly affected by these technologies. Why do we so easily accept the influence of commercial imperatives on our existence? How can the individual play a leading role in the use of technology and eventually in the future of our digital society?

These fundamental questions are at the base of the artistic activity of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud. The end of the 20th century, with the commercialization of the personal computer, mobile devices and the introduction of the Internet, has seen radical changes in social behavior, together with the establishment of new epistemological models and paradigms. The artists intend to reflect precisely upon these emerging models and behaviors. Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud are not subversive because they provide the Chinese people with tools to break through the Internet censorship or because they show censored pornographic images. Their work is subversive and even seditious because it calls into question and challenges models and behaviors that are commonly taken for granted. By giving back to the consumers the keys to the tools of the digital era, and an understanding of the context that regulates these tools, they also give them the responsibility to question and reshape the paradigms, the moral values, and the social behavior of our contemporary society.

To regard the work of Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud as political because it addresses precise

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11 See, for example, Thacker, Eugene: The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture. Cambridge, Mass. 2005. And the collected essays, see Costa, Beatriz da / Philip, Kavita (eds.): Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience. Cambridge, Mass. 2008.

political topics and local political difficulties would be simplistic. Their work is political because it originates from the desire to politicize the aspects of our contemporary life, more particularly the ones that we constantly forget to consider under a political angle. Electronic devices like laptops and mobile phones need to be viewed in a broader political context to ensure that the circumstances of their consumption and their meaning for our society are correctly understood. Instead of pitting the consumer against powerful corporations and the authorities, they invite the consumers to actively participate in the political, economic, and cultural system in which they live. Unmistakably, the artists affirm the responsibility of the individual in shaping our society and the moral values upon which it is based.

'Weltanschauung'

To come back to the stencil painting, the tool and the message, it appears clear how these three elements are part of a complex but consistent discourse. Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud have decided to work with modern tools because they believe it is necessary to address questions that concern our existence today. Their vision of art is one that is deeply embedded in society. Hence, their creative act is one of shaping visions and raising questions, rather than the mere development of a specific device or software. Their work is innovative in the recent tradition of media art, inducing a shift from a confrontational approach to a constructive one, but it also builds on the long tradition of painting as 'Weltanschauung', in which

the artist, by opening a window on the world, invites the viewer to experience another perception of it.

Boris Magrini (*1975) is assistant curator at Kunsthalle Zurich. He earned a Master's degree in Art History and Philosophy at the University of Geneva and is currently performing research for his PhD in the field of media arts at the University of Zurich. Magrini was curator at Duplex (Geneva), I Sotterranei dell'Arte (Monte Carasso, Bellinzona), and assistant director at Kunsthalle Fribourg. In 2007, he curated the exhibition "Mutamenti" (Bellinzona) on the globalization of culture. In 2014 the journal "Leonardo" will publish his article on Swiss Bio-Hackers "Hackteria: An Example of Neomodern Activism".

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