Not Art&Tech

On the role of Media Theory at Universities of Applied Art, Technology and Art and Technology.

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Thank you for the chance to introduce my ideas. I'm a net artist, active in the field since 20 years, 16 of these years I am teaching new media designers at Merz Akademie. I'm also a co-author of the book *Digital Folklore*. Since the beginning of the century I collect, preserve and monumentalize the web culture of the 90's. "What Does It Mean to Make a Web Page" is the doctoral thesis I work on right now.

As an artist, researcher and teacher I value user culture and medium specificity in both design and research, and as an every day routine. I see my work contributing to critical digital culture, media literacy and the development of languages and dialects of New Media.

But there are many obstacles on my way. Three years ago I grasped and boiled them down to three: technology, experience and people. Or rather "technology," "experience" and "people"—I have nothing against any of these concepts unless they are used by hardware and software companies as substitutes for "computer," "interface" and "users."

$$\text{Computer} \rightarrow \text{Technology}$$
$$\text{Interface} \rightarrow \text{Experience}$$
$$\text{Users} \rightarrow \text{People}$$

The situation is serious and these substitutions are happening on an epidemic scale.

In my essays *Turing Complete User*[1] and *RUE*[2] I trace the metamorphoses that happened to the terms "users" and "interfaces." Today, talking about the role of media theory at the University of Applied Arts, I would like to start to elaborate on "technology" and why to resist "Art and Technology."

I should note that by defending the words in the left column, I always find myself in an

unfortunate situation. First of all because in our field you should always go for the new, the next term if you are unsatisfied with the current one,—not backwards, at least not to the nearest past. Nobody wants to be called "user." The effort to deface this word was enormous and successful. Even when you understand that "people" coming from the tech industry's mouth is pure hypocrisy, you would prefer to fight for your user rights by calling yourself "digital citizen," not a user… though there is no digital city, state or constitution.

And I also find myself in awkward situations. Like it is the case now, because I know that there is Art and Technology department at your University; and because the next moment I use an institution as an example that I have very close relations to, and that is probably the only one in the world that supports my work, because it is devoted to net art and keeping an archive of it: Rhizome at the New Museum in New York.

A year ago, during their community campaign, Rhizome, whose priority is to push critical digital culture released nicely designed bags. If it would be another organization, or if it would be a bag of a size that wouldn't suggest that its purpose is to carry around your personal computer, I would pass by, but it was not the case, so the bag was vandalized.

"Don't fall for the word 'technology'", Ted Nelsons concludes in the last paragraph of *Geeks bearing Gifts,*[3] "It sounds determinate. It hides the fights and the alternatives. And mostly it is intended to make you submissive." He appeals to not accept computer

technology as *WYSIHAM*—his own acronym for *What You See is Wonderfully, Happily, Absolutely Mandatory*—but to see the tensions, the history and the alternatives. It is an important call, but only one third of the argument I have against the term technology.

Submission is one issue, but sedation is even more important. "Technology" as a replacement for digital technology or computer technology, who are in turn already substitutes for "programmed system," is a figure of speech known as *synecdoche*: in this particular case when the whole is referring for a part.

It is a rhetorical trope that makes the computer dissolve in all other technologies, becoming an invisible part, just one of many technologies. It is in the interest of the industry, because it makes users unaware of the computer as a system that is programmed, that can be reprogrammed any moment, that could potentially be programmed or reprogrammed by their users.

There are (re-)programmable technologies and many that are not programmable. But constant repetition of the word technology instead of computers sedates and makes forget that the system you hold in your hands is a programmable one.

It appears that another good reason to say technology instead of computer is that anyway—they say—computers are inside almost every piece of technology anyway, or as Kevin Kelly writes in his book *What technology Wants*—not recommended reading, but can't avoid to mention it here—: "these days all technology follows computer technology."[5]

In the end of the day, technology is explicitly used as a new word for computer, not any other technologies, including digital ones, but explicitly digital ones. So the purpose is to avoid saying computer. Indeed technology is not a synecdohe but an euphemism.

"It's time to give up this talk of technology with big T and instead figure out how different technologies can boost and compromise the human condition." Evgenij Morozov makes a rare constructive suggestion in his sour *To Save Everything Click Here*.[6]

***"Technology" sedates.
"Art&Tech" beams loyalty.***

It is tempting to agree, but I would argue again that both Technology with big T as well as technologies with small ts should be replaced by computer with whatever sizes of the c. I know computer is an abstraction as well, but it still connotates algorithmic powers, programmability. It describes what happens with society, with culture, with arts.

Rhizome's most successful event is *Seven on Seven*. The promotional text says: "[…] Seven

on Seven conference pairs seven leading artists with seven luminary technologists, and challenges them to make something new together — be it an application, artwork, provocation, or whatever they imagine — over the course of a single day."

Technologist are people of different backgrounds, including art or at least artistic ambitions, with something in common—they can program or… which was more of the case lately— they represent the software industry.

Art and Technology as of today, or even "Art&Tech"—a term I learned about in early 2014 while reading articles reporting about both *Seven on Seven* and the monumental exhibition *Digital Revolution* at Barbican, London—is not a revolutionary art form or an artistic movement. Art&Tech is, like "technology," a figure of speech. It swiftly replaces Computer Art, Digital Art, Media Art. Art&Tech alludes to the almost 50 years old E.A.T program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—*Experiments with Art and Technology*.

In 1967 E.A.T was promoted as artists bridging the world of technophobes and technophiles, art entering the world of engineers, "working with materials that only industry can provide."[7] Contemporary art institutions love Art and Technology as a brand because it gives a strong connection to E.A.T., which is both history and establishment, and a celebrated example of artists collaborating with West Coast Industries.

The next epochal 70 artist group-exhibition I am in will take place 2016 at Whitechapel, London. The title is *Electronic Superhighway*, a term coined by Nam June Paik in 1974, but the show is IMHO artificially extended back to 1966, to be less Media/Computer/Internet, to include artifacts of E.A.T., and be more "tech."

"Technology" sedates. "Art&Tech" beams loyalty.

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Siegfried Zielinski writes: "Terms are scaffolding for the abstractions that we need for thinking and acting upon them. The definitions we choose should satisfy two important criteria: they should be temporary and open — to facilitate further operations."[8]

"Technology," though sounding open enough, at the moment is a term that turns scaffolding into a fence, *Gerüste* into *Rüstung*, it disarms those who would want to approach the field critically.

The spreading of the word technology reminds (but not equals) to me the turn happening 15-20 years ago, when digital computer or digital medium was substituted by *New Media*.

In 2000 Jannet Murray optimistically interpreted this process in her introduction to *The New Media Reader* as "a sign of our current confusion about where these efforts are leading and our breathlessness at the pace of change, particularly in the last two decades of the 20th century."[4]

The breathlessness is gone together with the century: New Media evangelists became angry men, new media optimist turned into skeptics. Sherry Turkle, who in 1984 believed or transmitted the believe of one of her respondents in *The Second Self*—"If people understand something as complicated as computer, they will demand greater understanding of other things"—, 30 years later ends her *Alone Together* with the words: "We deserve better. When we remind ourselves that it is we who decide how to keep technology (sic!) busy, we shall have better."[9]

As Zielinsky points out in the introduction to *After the Media*, "[…] the promise that the media can create a different, even a better world seems laughable from the perspective of our experience with the technologically based democracies of markets."[10]

Along with "the better world," turning into "making the world a better place" (every second start-up's objective); along with computers turning into invisible computers, media arts into Art&Tech; and the rise of technology as the invisible computer; research in media, new media and media theory itself was going through difficult times.

"Due to the tremedous efforts during the 20th century [media] got exhausted,"[11] Zielinsky concludes. After the Media belongs to a growing number of texts that elaborate on the situation where media theory finds itself in the position "after," "post," "no" and simple past tense.

After Media, Media After Kittler, Media after Media, Anti-Media (Florian Cramer). Post Digital, post-#occupy and post-prism. "What were media" (Was waren Medien) was an important event and publication organized by Claus Pias at the University of Vienna in 2006/07—almost decade ago—as was the 2007 Transmediale conference with the panel Media Art undone: here it is even past perfect. The latter was also the moment for me personally to give up and claim to never talk about the difference in between media art and net art publicly.[12] I didn't know that some years later me as a net artist would be confronted with *Post Internet*.

Words are important. There is a huge gap (or at least a possibility for it) in between "after" and "post." Post is loaded with crisis, rejection, urge for action. After is fatigue, exodus, but not only. It is also a change of the perspective to a bird's eye view, a chance to grasps from the outside what was happening around you or even build by you before.

Jussi Parikka writes in his Postscriptum to *Media After Kittler*: "Just when we were supposed to reach the peak excitement about media technological innovation — the biggest innovation revealed to be about it disappearance."[13]

Well, it was neither a conspiracy nor a sudden turn or force majeure.

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Marshall Mcluhan Full lecture: The medium is the message, 1977 / Official Apple (New) iPad Trailer, 2012

[on youtube](#)

Media theory situated in applied arts on the one hand can be seen in a meaningful and pleasant neighborhood. Who if not media designers, media and transmedia artists should be interested or be made interested in the ways media becomes the message and defines the situation. Who if not them are to be nurtured with media theory's ideas, and give back in form of art works, artistic research and designs.

At the same time it is not a peaceful situation, on contrary, maybe the most challenging neighborhood for media theory, because (if the curriculum is balanced and up-to-date) the students have to learn the origins of digital culture, computer science, read Vannevar Bush, J.C.R. Licklieder, Alan Kay, Alan Turing, Joseph Weizenbaum, Don Norman, those who conceptualized and theorized digital media.

What I argue for is turning around the New Media Art departments—for media studies—are not just places where theory meets praxis, where media theory meets media praxis (and art meets tech), but where two theories meet

"practical turn." each other, two traditions, two schools of thought: One is all about revealing, the other—about hiding. McLuchan's interview is from 1977 and Apple's ad from 2012. You can read my collage as now and then, theory and practice, but keep in mind that while McLuhan is writing, Alan Kay is writing and Adele Goldberg is writing, they're not prototyping, they conceptualize a meta-medium. Don Norman, a doctor of philosophy and a cognitive scientist who is today known as the father of user centered design, he—while McLuchan is talking—is criticizing the philosophy of Unix and himself already working on a paradigm that would result in computers becoming invisible technology.

So, this clash of theories, concepts and intentions—what to do with it, apart from using students' heads as magic pots, where both would melt into a brilliant project or writing?

If you ask me the big deal today, and the task for media theory, would be to go into confrontation. Not to analyze the media of today, but question the assumptions on which they were built and take care of the generation who could rebuild them.

Media theory with its half a century experience and toolbox about how to reveal could take a leading role in educating people who can change the paradigm of media. What I argue for is turning around the "practical turn," to examine the concepts and theories underlying the practice. For example: to question Licklider's postulates on what computers can do best and suggest models different from *man computer symbiosis*; to argue for ambiguity in software architecture, to question "variability" as a principle of new media as well as "automation"; to establish another, counter paradigm: "The computer of the future should be visible." It is the main topic on my agenda for media theory.

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Now to the more obvious matter: theory and practice.

Media theory and media artists are the closest colleagues. We appear in the same exhibitions and publications, we share panel sofas.

What would post digital as a philosophy do without post internet as phenomenon? What would net criticism do without net artists? This were the artists who conceptualize the field and are still busy re-conceptualizing it.

Simple Net Art Diagram

The art happens here

MTAA ca. 1997

= the art happens here
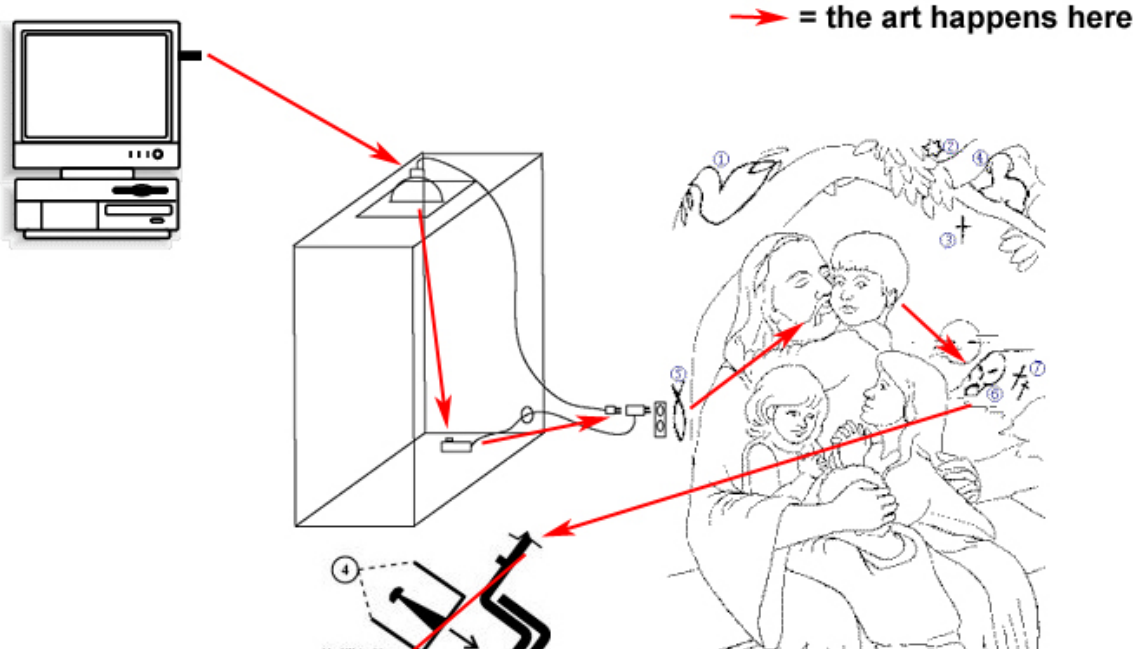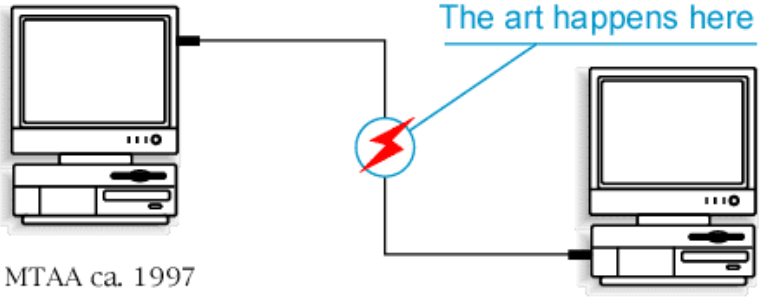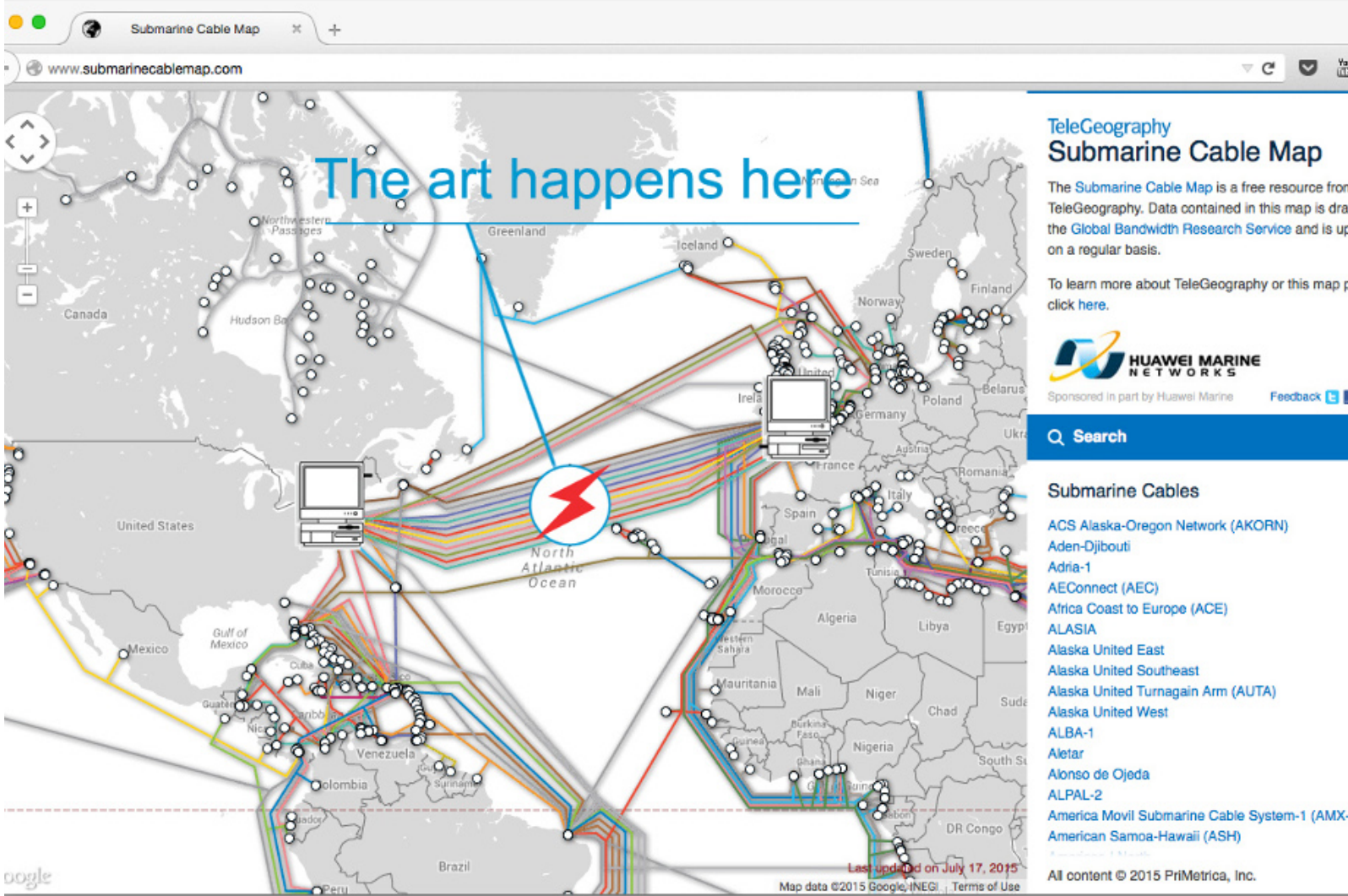
From MTAA's 1997 *Simple Net Art Diagram* that pointed attention to the true spirit of net art, through Rick Silva's response to it, to Evan Roth's map from 2015, which is showing a strong or even hypertrophied emphasis on the physical, material, hardware in today's net art scene.

From its first days, media theory and cultural theory had very warm feelings for artists. Theorists count on artists as being the first to explore and make sense out of new media, or the most powerful to resist. They look at their work in search for arguments for their theories (which I think caused some misconceptions in new media.) Critical thinkers of all schools look with hope at creative minds.

On the last pages of his aforementioned book—which made fun of every division of Silicon Valley and every previous attempt to criticize it—Evgeny Morozov makes an effort to be optimistic and turns his eyes to artistic experiments with the "internet of things." Even the most disillusioned ones are ready to fall into charms of Art&Tech.

are no longer capable of transmitting
the thoughts
and concepts which we have

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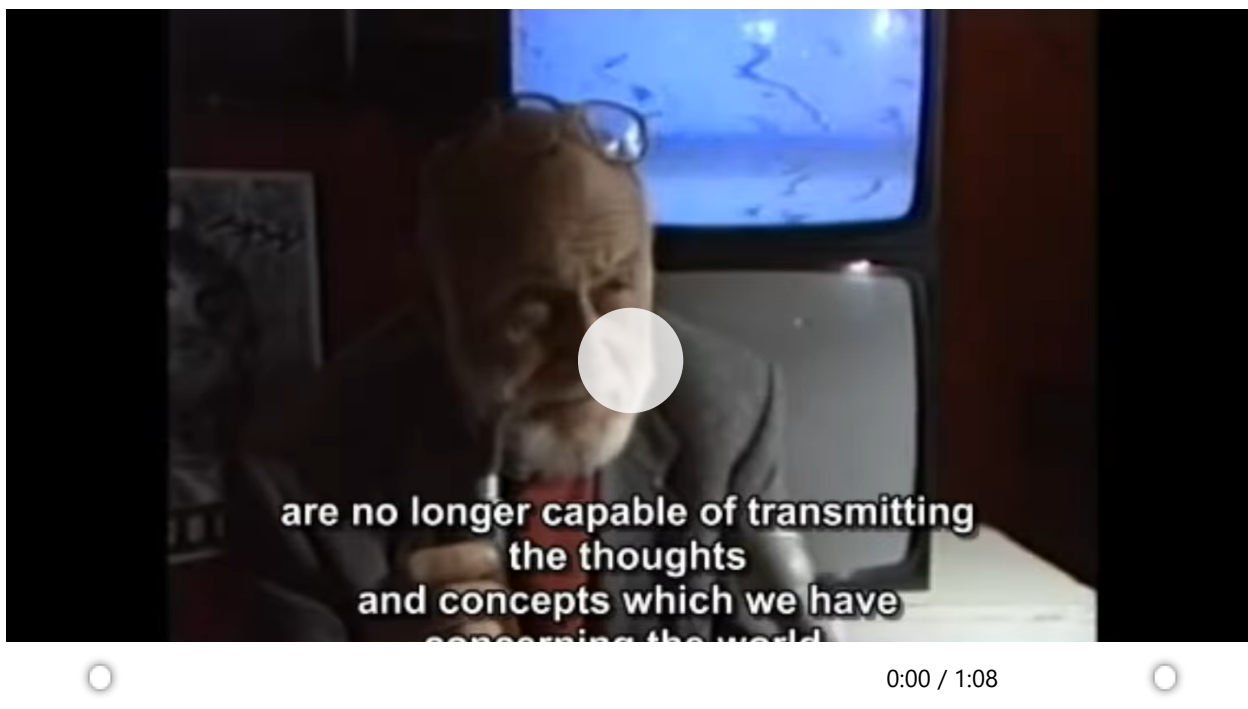
Vilém Flusser On writing, Complexity and Technical Revolution, 1988 / Silicon Valley Season 1: Episode 1, 2014

on youtube

"What are those who sit in front of their computers, pressing keys, making lines, surfaces and shapes, actually doing? They realize opportunities", writes Vilém Flusser in *Digitaler Schein*.[14]

People around the globe are appealing to Silicon Valley for features and justice.

"Verwirklichen von Möglichkeiten" (realization of opportunities) that Flusser so generously assigned to programmers or users of computer programs 25 years ago should be seen as an instruction. It could become a core for any new media curriculum. What kind of opportunities students are realizing is the question though. How to resist both: the "bit soup"—perpetual flirting with the Digital—and the demand for "apps!" of the Art&Tech market?

In the very moment I prepared for this talk, a message arrived in my inbox: the petition of a few young and a few established media artists and media literate art institutions:

> "Dear Apple, Bring art to the world and the world to art! Please add an 'Art' category to the App Store."

In my picture of the world, if media artists are to go into interaction with Apple, the main if not the only thing they have to demand is to close the App Store. So I made some sarcastic tweets and even drew a caricature.

The art happens here

But as it seems my irony was too covert and the picture too cryptic. So it was interpreted as support for the campaign.

While I was busy with my tweets and angry image manipulation, terrible things were happening in Paris. The next morning was all about accumulating news and tracking friends.

I asked my daughter, who was studying in Paris last year, if she heard anything from her friends. "Almost everyone marked safe," she said. Facebook's new feature for regions hit by natural disaster that automates checking if your loved ones are OK was turned on after a terrorist attack for the first time. This act brought Facebook many likes. But also criticism. Users from Lebanon wanted to know why the safety mark was not activated some days earlier, when attacks happened in Beirut? They asked to turn it on; and quickly after Zuckenberg excused and had it enabled.

Sobhiya Najjar صبحية
@Sobhiyanajjar
⚙ 👤+ Follow

@finkd Could You please create the #MarkedSafe #MarkedTerritory to #Lebanon and the Arab world because we live in an open war.

1:15 AM - 14 Nov 2015

In no way I want to compare Beirut's demand to turn on this feature with media artists' appeal to turn on an Art category in App Store. I also think it is different from the frustration Russian Facebook users express now in their micro blogs: Why the French tricolor is available as an avatar decoration, but no Russian flag theme was there when the Russian plane exploded in mid-air over Egypt?

Though, formally these events are similar: people around the globe are appealing to Silicon Valley for features and justice.

In *Media After Media* Bernhard Siegert notes that "the concept of media has become completely identical with interfaces and digital objects that can be manipulated on the screen."[15] It is a very right observation and one can only add that those interfaces are provided by three, maybe five companies.

By researching or critically approaching media or "technology," we are in fact researching Apple, Google and Facebook, their algorithms, their interfaces, their pragmatical and aesthetic decisions.

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Olga Goriunova on Digital Subject, 2015 / Deep Cheese Dreams by Neue Modern

[on youtube](#)

Some weeks ago the event *Algorithmic Regimes and Generative Strategies* took place at the Technical University of Vienna, I could only attend it online. Not to confront you solely with ideas of big dead men, at the end of my talk I chose some seconds of Olga Goriunova's

lecture, in which she rises the question about the Digital Subject, Data Double, or one can say the Second Self of our times—identity as generated by algorithms

I allowed to myself to merge it with a video that makes use of Google's *Deep Dream*, the image classifying algorithm that sees dogs everywhere. This past summer's visual mainstream looks like a dream by Timothy Leary and reads like Donna Harraway's scenario of chimeric machine-animal fusion implemented.

YouTube changes its interface every other day, Facebook rolls out global changes once in a while. Both routine and revolutionary changes provide food for thought, constantly. Not only among theoreticians, but everybody. Today everybody is a little McLuhan interpreting the messages of the media. What did Twitter mean when it changed stars to hearts? What does Google mean with dogs?

Google's algorithm sees dogs everywhere because it was trained to recognize dogs. Some questions have simple answers. It is practically impossible to find answers to serious questions like "what is the digital subject," even formulating those questions is a noble task, because rules, algorithms and terms change on fly.

And when it comes to teaching media artists, media designers: how to formulate the questions? With what to excite and provoke students? To agendas I mentioned before: empowering students to change the invisible computing paradigm and refusing the "opportunity" of Art&Tech—let me add another one:

To take time to formulate questions that can not be answered by monopolies or by observing the monopolies.

olia@profolia.org, @GIFmodel

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[1] Lialina, Olia: *Turing Complete User*, 2012

[2] Lialina, Olia: *Rich User Experience, UX and Desktopization of War*, 2014

[3] Nelson, Ted: *Geeks Bearing Gifts*, Mindful Press, 2009, p196

[4] Jannet Murray: *Inventing the Medium*, in: Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Ed): The New Media Reader, MIT Press, 2003, p3

[5] Kelly, Kevin: *What Technology Wants*, Viking Press, 2010, p159

[6] Morozov, Evgeny: *To Save Everything, Click Here*, Public Affairs Books, 2014, p323

[7] Tuchman, Maurice: *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of*

Art, 1971, p11

[8] Zielinski, Siegfried: *[...nach den Medien]*, Merve Verlag, 2011, p11:

> "Begriffe sind Gerüste der Abstraktion, die wir für das eingreifende Denken und Handeln benotigen. Die Festslegungen, die wir treffen, sollten indessen zwei wichtigen Kriterien genügen. Sie sollten provisorischen Charater haben und offen genug sein, damit sie weitere Operationen ermöglichen."

[9] Turkle, Sherry: *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p296

[10] Zielinski, Siegfried: *[...nach den Medien]*, Merve verlag, 2011, p16:

> "Eine Aktualisierung des Versprechens, dass die Medien eine andere, sogar eine bessere Welt schaffen können, wirkt aus unserer Erfahrungsperspektive der technologisch basierten Demokratien der Märkte lächerlich."

[11] Zielinski, Siegfried: *[...nach den Medien]*, Merve Verlag, 2011, p16:

> "Durch die gewaltigen Anstrenungen des zwangzigsten Jahrhunderts sind [die Medien] zudem ermüdet."

[12] Lialina, Olia: *Flat against the wall*, 2007

[13] Parikka, Jussi: *Postscript: Of Dissapearancrs and the Ontology of Media (Studies)*, in: Ikoniadou Eleni and Scott Wilson (Ed): Media After Kittler, Rowman&Littlefield, 2015, p178

[14] Flusser, Vilém: *Digitaler Schein*, in: Medienkultur, Fischer, 1997, p213:

> "Was machen diejenigen eigentlich, die vor den Computern sitzen, auf Tasten drücken und Linien, Flächen und Körper erzeugen?… Sie verwirklichen Möglichkeiten."

[15] Siegert, Bernhard: *Media After Media*, in: Ikoniadou Eleni and Scott Wilson (Ed): Media After Kittler, Rowman&Littlefield, 2015, p85