

Cornelia Sollfrank

THE THING Hamburg. A Temporary Democratization of the Local Art Field.

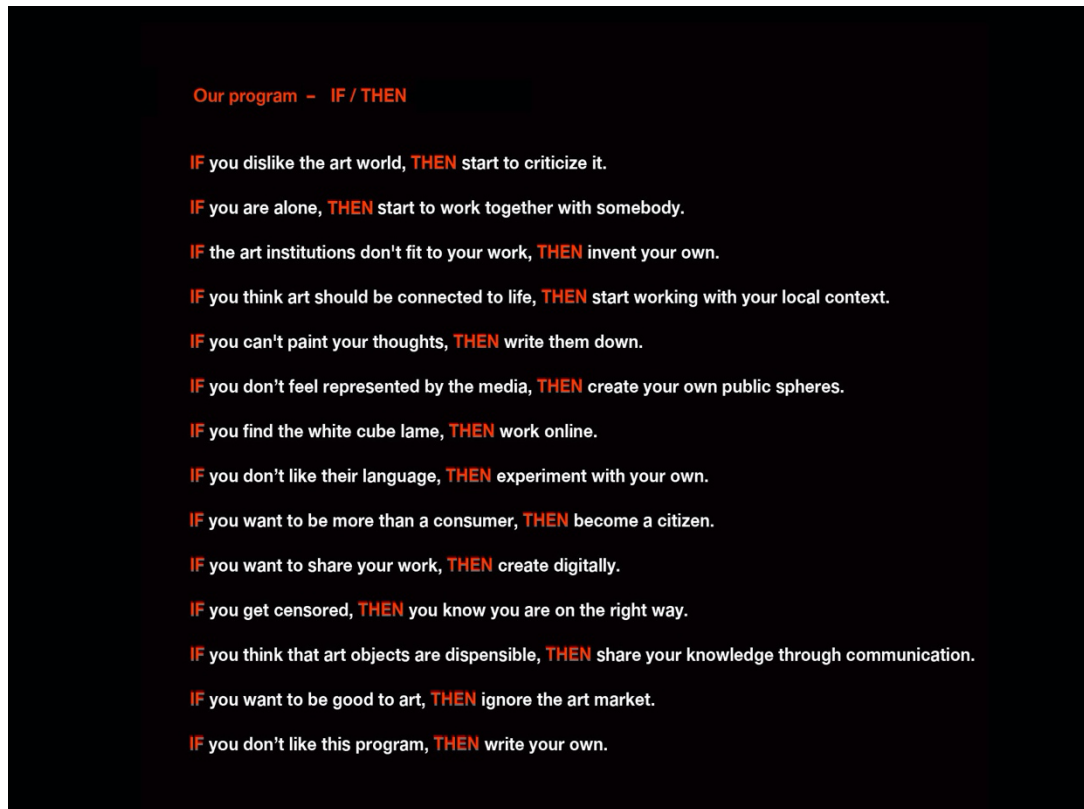
Published in: *Leonardo Electronic Almanac Book*, Volume 20 Issue 1, "Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism"; book senior editors Lanfranco Aceti, Susanne Jaschko, Julian Stallabrass; book editor: Bill Balaskas. LEA is a publication of Leonardo/ISAST and MIT Press. ISSN 1071-4391, ISBN 978-1-906897-28-4.

Introduction

THE THING Hamburg was an independent Internet publishing platform for art and criticism that was in operation between 2006 and 2009. Within the larger framework of the Internet as a laboratory for social innovation, it was a local artistic experiment that aimed at using networked technology for the democratization of the art field. To anticipate the end: the project only lasted for three years. We decided to cancel the experiment at the point when public funding ended and the initiative's status as art project was revoked by the city's tax authorities.

In this paper we will trace the circumstances that led to the emergence of the project in the first place, describe how it was organized, and discuss various historical precursors as well as the core questions and contradictions that are inherent in art projects that claim socio-political impact: is it possible that an art identifiable as such has any effect? Or to put it differently: how can art operate as art and still work on the expansion of what is accepted as art? We also look at the role new technologies can play within that context as a means to build new spaces and break new ground that allows for a discussion and practice, which takes place – and only 'can' take place – beyond traditional categorizations.

In its aim to democratize the local art field, THE THING Hamburg had concrete effects; it had an impact on the city of Hamburg, the (local) art field, and on the numerous people involved. We reflect on this impact and our experiences and would like to share them in order to engage in a broader discussion of what still has to be done. 'We,' the authors of this text, were actively involved in the project on various levels: Cornelia Sollfrank initiated the project and later became chairwoman of the association that operated the project; Rahel Puffert was a founding member of the association and later succeeded as chairwoman; Michel Chevalier was an active user and contributor to the platform.



THE THING Hamburg Program, 2010. Poster for the exhibition Shanghai-Hamburg (urban public) Space [SHupS], Cornelia Sollfrank, Kathrin Wildner, Rahel Puffert. Creative commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported

A Concurrence of Local Conditions and a Tested Artistic Concept

The principal idea of THE THING Hamburg was to build a technology-based and non-exclusive environment, which would emphasize a critical discussion of local conditions while, at the same time, tracking contemporary theory and the general upheavals taking place in the cultural realm. On a structural level, the platform was the expansion of two smaller projects of local artistic self-organization: the calendar of events kunstecho-hamburg.de and [echo] – the mailing list for art, criticism and cultural policy.¹ On a conceptual level, THE THING Hamburg grounded itself in the idea of that artist-driven communication network founded by German artist Wolfgang Staehle in New York City in 1991: The Thing.

¹ Both projects remained intact during the existence of the THE THING Hamburg and are fully functional until today. In April 2013 the mailing list [echo] counts over 1,500 subscribers. Since its establishment, in 2003, by Cornelia Sollfrank, the list has played an important role in disseminating independent information regarding art and cultural policy, thus, establishing a context for sharing information and fostering critical discussion.

In the run-up to THE THING Hamburg

The idea of initiating a platform for art and criticism in Hamburg emerged in 2005, after a number of interventions and direct actions within the art field in Hamburg had mobilized hundreds of artists and cultural producers; this laid the grounds for further organization.

The preceding years had indeed been marked by local developments that were strongly contradictory in nature. The mid-to-late 1990s were a period in which it had become almost obligatory for art students and recent graduates to start their own exhibition spaces, which were removed from both commercial galleries and institutions. Pre-existing artist-run initiatives such as Künstlerhaus Hamburg (founded 1977), Westwerk (founded in 1985) and KX (founded in 1987) could not do justice to the many new approaches. These newer projects were motivated by interests as diverse and contradictory as being a launching-pad for the gallery scene, refining approaches that could be 'exported' to institutions, creating hybrid spaces between party clubs and art spaces, developing alternatives to the white cube, making political art, working collectively, avoiding the 'formatting' of the art market.² Long shadows were cast on these activities by two theory fashions since discredited, but all the rage then: "relational art" and postmodern institutional critique.³

The optimism underlying this fractious experimentation hit a brick wall in 2001, after the events of 9/11 spilled into the Hamburg mayoral election, unseating the Social Democrats after over 40 years in power. The new government was a coalition of the Christian Democrats and the xenophobic Partei Rechtstaatlicher Offensive (Law and Order Offensive Party). Within a year, the city drastically switched its cultural funding priorities, favoring 'beacon projects,' real-estate development, and public-private partnerships. No twenty-year anniversary celebration of the city's once-famed art-in-public-space program was held in 2002. Instead, that year the University of Fine Arts (HfbK) was subjected to a new city law and restructured by its newly appointed director, who weakened the control that students and staff could exercise on his power.

A tipping point came in 2005, on three separate fronts. The first was funding: twenty artist-run spaces formed the lobby *Wir Sind Woanders* (*We are somewhere else*) in order to stave off cuts from the city that would have threatened their existence.⁴ The second, cultural policy: at the initiative of Cornelia Sollfrank, 121 artists each adopted one of the 121 members of the Hamburg City Council to express their protest against the newly planned International Maritime Museum.⁵

² In 2000, the local magazine *Szene Hamburg* ran profiles of nine of these new projects.

³ In 2007, Jean Claude Moineau provided dismissive epitaphs for both: see *Contre l'art global, pour un art sans identité* (Alfortville: ere, 2007), 14-16. This section is also available in English translation at THE THING Hamburg website, "Excerpts from 'Contre l'art global pour un art sans identité,'" 13 November 2008, <http://www.thing-hamburg.de/index.php?id=919> (accessed: September 24, 2013).

⁴ See Jörn Müller and Nora Sdun, eds., *Wir Sind Woanders Reader #1* (Hamburg: Textem, 2007) and Anabela Angelovska, Michel Chevalier, and Nora Sdun, eds., *Wir Sind Woanders Reader #2* (Hamburg: Textem, 2009).

⁵ The museum was a public-private partnership with right-wing publisher Peter Tamm, whose 'maritime' collection indicated less any historic or scientific method than a desire to exhibit Nazi devotionalia. The city contributed 30 million EUR and a historic building to the deal.

The third: patronage (and its hidden strings). This was the so-called 'éclat' at the city-funded Kunstverein in Hamburg (Hamburg Contemporary Art Center). That year, many critical artists were newly elected in the Kunstverein's nine-member Board of Directors. For collectors, gallerists, and the market-oriented director of the Center, however, this was a stinging defeat, slandered thereafter as a "putsch." A court decision ultimately allowed the election to be held again, as sought by former chairman and well-known collector Harald Falckenberg; control by the art-business fraction was reestablished.

The-coming-into-being of THE THING Hamburg

The two projects that already had a networking function within Hamburg's self-organized art scene were [echo] – the mailing list for art, criticism and cultural policy, founded in 2003 by Cornelia Sollfrank, with about 400 subscribers at that time, and the self-organized calendar of events kunstecho-hamburg.de, run by Ulrich Mattes since early 2005. The mailing list in particular had already proven successful as a tactical medium for the dissemination of critical information and the organization of actions. In the loosely organized field, it functioned as a flexible, easy-to-use and easily accessible means of organization. Although mailing lists are mainly described as "translocal networks,"⁶ the combination of a local, urban field of reference and virtual communication has, still to this day, yielded lasting synergies.

Sollfrank and Mattes struck up a strategic alliance to facilitate a new, web-based Internet platform, which would expand the scope of participation and intensify a substantive discussion of local conditions. They conceived an initial first concept and put it up for discussion at a public meeting. During a discussion process that lasted several months, a group of nine people eventually volunteered to take responsibility for the platform. It was a diverse group of cultural producers with different backgrounds and skill sets who were all enthusiastic about the idea of a platform, although there were – and remained – disagreements regarding the art status of the project. Eventually, the group founded the legal entity THE THING Hamburg e.V. for the advancement of art and criticism, a non-profit organization (gemeinnütziger Verein) whose purpose was to establish and run THE THING Hamburg.⁷ This legal status entitled the group to apply for public funding that would back up the personal investment involved. During earlier negotiations, the Hamburg Cultural Office offered funding from a special budget (Sondermittel), complemented by funding for public art (15%). For its three years of existence, the project had an overall budget of about 170,000 EUR of which 41% was financed through public funding and the rest through the personal investment of the members of the association.

⁶ Inke Arns, *Netzkulturen*, (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 76.

⁷ Founding date was August 2006; founding members included Cornelia Sollfrank, Ulrich Mattes, Herbert Hossmann, Rahel Puffert, Malte Steiner, Hans-Christian Dany, Ulrike Bergermann, Ole Frahm and Barbara Thoens. The club rules are available in German only at *THE THING Hamburg* website: <http://www.thing-hamburg.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Zusammen/Satzung-TheThingHamburg.pdf> (accessed September 24, 2013).

History and Historicization of The Thing

In its first incarnation The Thing, founded by German artist Wolfgang Staehle in New York in 1991, was an experiment in exploring the potential of new information technologies for various artistic purposes. Equipped with a modem and a computer, the involved artists “went online” to discuss with others, break new grounds for aesthetic expression, or build infrastructures for others to communicate. Departing from the notion of institutional critique, a main driving force for Staehle was to go beyond the making of critical art works within the art institutional context, embodying a stance critical of institutions by building an independent structure.⁸ Others joined to help building the infrastructure, to populate it and fill it with life and content.

In the initial phase of The Thing, from 1991-1995, the project consisted of a number of small international nodes engaging in text-based exchange. They were connected through a bulletin board system, which offered boards for various themes.⁹ In the midst of the technological and also conceptual developments of the mid 1990s, the formerly small nodes largely disappeared; some of them were transformed into discrete Internet platforms and new ones were initiated. The focus of The Thing activities shifted from enabling exchange and creating discourse to building more complex, mainly locally-oriented information infrastructures to foster media art and activism and support media artists. The Thing New York, for instance, became an Internet provider and also hosted artists’ websites and mailing lists. The mainly experimental discourse-enabling function made way for context and community building via technical services.¹⁰

Since 1991 a total of twelve independent branches emerged (and vanished) in seven different countries, with THE THING Hamburg being the most recent one.¹¹ All The Thing platforms have given credit to the first The Thing in New York as inspiration, while operating completely independently and implementing highly different versions of the basic idea: to create an artistically organized information and communication infrastructure. Having said that, all local The Thing platforms have considered themselves as equal parts of the international The Thing network, which served as a kind of conceptual meta-structure.

Despite the institution-critical spirit from which the early The Thing had emerged, the project slowly converged with the art world. The Thing International was exhibited as an art project,¹²

⁸ Wolfgang Staehle in an interview with Dieter Daniels, Net Pioneers 1.0 website, <http://www.netzpioniere.at/> (accessed September 24, 2013).

⁹ For a more detailed history of *The Thing* also see the article on Wikipedia website: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thing_\(art_project\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thing_(art_project)), (accessed May 9, 2013).

¹⁰ The thesis that *The Thing* underwent a transformation from “the production of pure sociality to product- or commodity like substitutes surrendering the stage to a more technologically attention-seeking work concept,” is also held by Marc Ries, “Rendez-vous: the Discovery of pure Sociality in early net art,” in Dieter Daniels and Gunther Reisinger, eds., *Net Pioneers 1.0: Contextualizing Early Net-Based Art* (Berlin and New York: Sternberg, 2010), 78.

¹¹ Wikipedia article on *The Thing*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thing_\(art_project\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thing_(art_project)) (accessed September 24, 2013).

¹² For example, in 1995 at the festival ‘ars electronica,’ see Karl Gerbel and Peter Weibel, eds., *Mythos Information. Welcome to the Wired World* (Wien/New York: Springer, 1995), 313-317.

numerous interviews were conducted with its founder in the art context,¹³ it had friendly relations with art institutions and received major art grants.¹⁴ Eventually, The Thing was categorized as Internet art and included in a number of art historical overviews investigating this genre.¹⁵ Interestingly, at the same time when the early The Thing became the subject of a major art-historical research project – fifteen years after its first launch –, it yielded its latest offspring: THE THING Hamburg. A fact that could have very well served the investigation and better understanding of the aesthetic and political complexity of the project, which was largely missed out.

THE THING Hamburg

THE THING Hamburg was a collective media experiment. It rested on the vision of artists empowered to speak and write about their own work as well as its framing policies and theories. Exploring the potential of an Internet-based Content Management System to open up public discussions,¹⁶ it was, in many respects, a reaction and an alternative to the distribution and mediation approaches preponderant in the art field. The concept was based on the premise that critical contemporary art can only arise from an intensive awareness and active reflection of its conditions and, in that sense, that critique is productive. For the initiators of THE THING Hamburg, this premise was a conviction. The disinclination of institutions in the city to serve as such a forum motivated the invention of a structure that made the above possible, while remaining, at the same time, subject to permanent change.

Insofar as writing is seen as an obvious component of artistic practice – something not delegated to experts such as critics or curators – the project could be viewed in the tradition of Conceptual art. This is also true for another reason: THE THING Hamburg offered a frame conducive to in-depth discussions about art, critically addressing the pressure to commodify and draw profits from artistic work. The approach taken was uncommon in the sense that it included the users by offering access, easy and free of charge, to an ongoing discourse. It allowed the users to intervene in and

¹³ Selection of interviews mit Wolfgang Staehle: *Lacanian ink* website, Jan Avgikos, <http://www.lacan.com/frameVIII15.htm> (accessed 3 June 2013); *The Thing* website, Dike Blair, "His Thingness," <http://www.thing.net/~lilyvac/writing34.html> (accessed September 24, 2013); netpioneers.info website, Dieter Daniels, <http://www.netzpioniere.at/> (accessed September 24, 2013); Telepolis website, Tilman Baumgaertel, "Website-Auktion: The Thing unter dem Hammer," <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/3/3372/1.html> (accessed September 24, 2013); Journal of Contemporary Art website, Klaus Ottmann, <http://www.jca-online.com/staehle.html> (accessed September 24, 2013); Baumgärtel, Tilman: *net.art – Materialien zur Kunst im Internet*, (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1999), 56-63.

¹⁴ The Thing has been generously supported by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts. *The Thing* website, <http://post.thing.net/about> (accessed September 24, 2013).

¹⁵ Dieter Daniels and Gunther Reisinger, eds., *Net Pioneers 1.0: Contextualizing Early Net-Based Art* (Berlin/New York: Sternberg, 2010); Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2008) 111; Edward A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media* (London: Phaidon, 2009, p. 50; Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, eds., *New Media Art* (Cologne: Taschen, 2006), 22-23.

¹⁶ The operators of the platform were very aware of the fact that people with no Internet access were excluded from that discussion and, in that sense, the notion of public was limited.

influence the course of the discussions, thus fostering a political learning process that aimed at practicing democracy.

Social and technological forms of participation

Assuming public discussion was the common goal of all those making contributions, there was, nevertheless, a hierarchy in the degree of participation. Initially, a non-profit institution was founded whose defined purpose was the support of art and criticism by running an Internet platform. The non-profit institution administered funds and was the point of contact for Hamburg City officials. The founding group decided to establish an editorial team, especially responsible for the direction of the website's content as well as its structure and interface modalities. The first group of editors was recruited from the founding members, but later underwent constant transformations. The editors were anchored in different cultural scenes, which should allow for the highest possible diversity of themes to be covered, while their different backgrounds in journalistic, artistic, or academic professions could ensure the lively co-existence of a variety of working styles and methods.

THE THING Hamburg also made the point of encouraging people with little or no journalistic experience to publish contributions, thereby offering technical and editorial assistance. In this case, the Internet provided advantages over print journalism: there were no limits to text length; unusual writing styles were explicitly called for and not subsequently standardized. The goal was to foster a plurality of voices and offer publication for those authors and projects that "fall through the cracks" in other outlets. In its three years of existence, THE THING Hamburg published the contributions of 120 authors. A so-called "unedited forum" was set up parallel to the other sections. It offered to any and all the chance to post visual and/or textual contributions without having to undergo any editorial screening. The authors of unedited contributions were, needless to say, not paid the 100 EUR that other contributors were. However, topics addressed in edited articles were picked up in the unedited forum, and vice versa. Both realms were of equal importance for the whole project. Each published contribution was coupled to a "comment" function allowing readers to address authors with their feedback. This opportunity was used with gusto: some discussions stretched out over months. The echo mailing-list was the perfect tool to announce every new article.

The design of the platform required close collaboration between the editors and the web designers. The fact that the desired social and political potential of such a platform could only unfold on the basis of a well-thought-out technological infrastructure was an important insight gained after two failed attempts to delegate the design to professionals. At the same time, discussing the technically available options and their particular implications resulted in a steep learning curve for the technically rather inexperienced editors.

At the suggestion of one of the web-designers, the decision was made to use TYPO3, a free and open-source web content management framework based on PHP. Being one of the most popular CMSes on the web, it turned out to fully meet the needs of the project: supported by a large number of international programmers, it made available a variety of functions and extensions, which then only needed to be built together to form one integrative system that combines stability and flexibility. It stores content and layout files separately, and the elaborate rights-managing function guarantees a secure but open and transparent system. The web designers acted as administrators of the site and initiated the editors to the extent that they were, then, each able to independently work with the system.

Content structure

Over time there was a crystallization of “sections” under which the various contributions could be classified (current events, special subjects of focus, thing-on-the-road, images, cultural policy). Special subjects included: changes in and reorientation of art education, forms of self-organization in the political and cultural realms, art in public space, culture-political conditions of artistic production – including funding policy, juries, and the marketing of cultural production. This was complemented by regular updates and tips about relevant events and funding opportunities, job offers, open calls, etc. Insofar as *THE THING Hamburg* recommended specific exhibitions, workshops, or lectures in town, it took up the chance to distinguish itself from other (official) institutions and mass media. By deliberately neglecting some exhibitions and announcing and reviewing others, the platform sharpened its profile as a corrective to official institutions’ politics of information and representation.

The thematic orientation of the sections also followed an approach one could identify with the notion of a “counter public sphere.”¹⁷ The platform empowered the activities of self-organized groups in the art scene, seized on conflict-ridden topics, and in this way initiated and moderated discussions spurring controversy in the city. Protest activities, for example at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (HfbK), were registered and discursively extended. Concrete arguments were injected into debates via critical interviews (e.g., with the Director of the HfbK), or culture-historical analysis (e.g., of the highly controversial and publicly-funded private collection of Peter Tamm, or the extravagantly over-budget Elbe-Philharmonic project). The issue of gentrification and the role of artists doing commissioned work for the *International Building Exhibition (IBA)* – held in a traditionally working class district with a high migrant population – drew exchanges of marked intensity on *THE THING Hamburg*, whereby efforts were made to offer space to voices not heard in the official media. The existence of *THE THING Hamburg* thereby added a critical impulse affecting public perceptions, one that could not be ignored by city and cultural administrators.

¹⁷ Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience, Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 91.



THE THING HAMBURG / START

EDITORIAL

21. Dezember 2008

Kathrin Wildner

Das letzte und das nächste Jahr

Weiterhin drehen sich die lokalen Diskussionen um Fragen der Zusammenarbeit mit prosperierenden Institutionen der Stadt – wie der IBA – und wie das Verhältnis von Kunst und Stadtentwicklung aussehen könnte. Ergänzend zu dem [Interview mit Anke Haarmann und Harald Lemke](#), den Kuratoren des „Elbinsel-Sommers 2008“, gibt es demnächst Ausschnitte aus einem Interview mit den Ausstellungsteilnehmern *Critical Art Ensemble*; gerade neu erschienen, ist eine [Besprechung dieser Veranstaltung](#) in Wilhelmsburg von Heike Breitenfeld und weitere – von Sabine Falk zusammengestellte – Kommentare Hamburger KünstlerInnen und AktivistInnen zur aktuellen Debatte um Stadtentwicklung, Gentrifizierung und die Instrumentalisierung der Kunst: [Pudels Reisen](#). Auf ein neues Jahr! [\[mehr\]](#)

BILDER



Nana Petzet

Wenn die Katze fort ist, tanzen die Mäuse

Im Winter 2004 wurde eines der wichtigsten Werke von Dieter Roth in Hamburg zerstört: Das Schimmelmuseum an der Alsterchaussee. Vom 28. Januar bis zum 19. Februar 2004 beobachtete Nana Petzet mit einer Gruppe von Freunden den Abriss. [\[mehr\]](#)



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The benefits of locality

From the very start, *THE THING Hamburg* consciously adopted a local scope. This did not mean that national or international issues and developments were neglected. On the contrary, the local anchoring offered many theoretical or reflective extrapolations of a general bearing on art discourse or cultural policy. Conversely, theoretical positions and critical thought gained traction with the examples of local circumstances, citing names when called for, and so avoiding a drift into abstract self-referentiality, or other manneristic pitfalls. The political meaning of this medium of communication lay precisely in this dialectic.

Hamburg, an unusually wealthy city of merchants, a former bastion of the Hanseatic League, in which social polarization cannot go unnoticed: it lends itself as both symptom and example for broader social debates. It is large enough to be abreast of global developments, while small enough to allow for an easy overview and monitoring of changes and developments, and the ongoing communication of this information to those various groups and “scenes” that are affected.

The local character of THE THING Hamburg also proved to be an advantage in other respects. Discussions did not have to remain virtual. On a sporadic basis, THE THING Hamburg set up public presentations or discussions in the city, touching on aforementioned themes and allowing for personal exchange with various authors and contributors, as well as the chance to clear up misunderstandings or just to get to know one another. Last but not least, such events were, also, an opportunity to get in touch with the editorial group and express criticism or discuss possible ways of collaboration on a personal level.

The art of spawning effects

Claiming THE THING Hamburg to be an Internet art project that attempted the democratization of the local art field suggests its location within specific historical contexts, as well as everyday social media. This leads to the elaboration of the implied conception of art and the discussion of the role that new technologies play for its realization.

Avant-garde relations

The Russian October Revolution and its immediate aftermath gave artists and art-theorists seeking a revolution in their own field unprecedented opportunities. On the one hand the *caesura* of the revolution allowed them to analyze all that was wrong with the art that had accompanied class domination. On the other, they could draw up new cultural programs, set up or take part in bodies of the new Soviet government, and theorize, produce, and exhibit new forms of art. The Russian avant-garde's project of fusing art and life is to this day a much used – and abused – point of reference. It is therefore worth bearing in mind that not just any integration of art into life was sought in those post-revolution years, but a very specific one:

“The use of an artist's work has no value *per se*, no purpose of its own, no beauty of its own; it receives all this solely from its relation to the community. In the creation of every great work the architect's part is visible and the community's part is latent. The artist, the creator, invents nothing that falls into his lap from the sky. [...]”¹⁸

What finds expression in this quote is a new understanding of the social function of art as well as a criticism of the bourgeois conception of the artist. According to this new understanding, an artist is no longer an individual expressing him-/herself, but rather invokes a self-issued *social* assignment. Consequently, the aimed-at work of art is considered to be a common product. Art steps out of its aesthetic constraints and contributes to the experiment of reorganizing society, of which art's own institutional structures, including art education and funding policies, are a part. In fact, only working on new forms of organization and new structures of production and dissemination would

¹⁸ El Lissitzky, “Ideological Superstructure,” in *Programs and Manifestoes of 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1971(1929)), 121.

enable the creation of new forms of art. This led to “basic problems of liberated work, linked in the closest way to the problems of the transformation of production culture on the one hand, and with the transformation of everyday on the other.”¹⁹

The elaborations of such claims in theory and practice, however, varied regarding the degree to which art would remain an independent field. Certain Productivists, for instance, wished for the outright integration of art into industrial production and proclaimed that art would become obsolete in a future, free society. Alexander Rodchenko temporarily advocated an experimental space for artists, a laboratory, in which artists would work on the development of a new vocabulary of forms and products that would invite their users to creatively engage with their environment, and whose purpose would be the empowerment of their users.²⁰

Indeed, just as Engels favored “scientific socialism” over those utopian socialisms, which – in his view – turned away from modernity, so did the Constructivists and Productivists push for an art that was in and of its time.²¹ Looking back at its reception, Hal Foster diagnosed that the scandal of the Russian avant-garde was that it not only posed analogies, but actually forged connections between artistic and industrial production, cultural and political revolution: “And this scandal (which remains its mystique) could not be entirely ignored; it had to be managed – averted and absorbed.”²²

The conceptual innovations yielded by the Russian avant-garde have served as a point of reference throughout the 20th century, especially for art that harbors socio-political ambitions. And it had been in particular those forms of art that embrace new technologies in artistic and experimental ways in order to achieve a socio-political agency that drew on avant-garde ideas.

The basis of Gene Youngblood’s conception of *MetaDesign* (1986) is a liaison of artists and designers who collaborate on the integration of technological and social systems. They would create virtual spaces in which people could experiment with technology for the purpose of self-organization, the acquisition of democratic skills and techniques of self-configuration (*Selbstgestaltung*). These “autonomous social worlds,” laboratories of “resocialization,” which bear an obvious reference to Rodchenko’s experimental spaces, are to empower users in an environment in which they may cultivate “creative conversations” and take control of the context

¹⁹ Editors of *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve* (1920), quoted by Christina Lodder, “Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s,” in Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska, *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 100.

²⁰ Rahel Puffert, *Die Kunst und ihre Folgen. Zur Genealogie der Kunstvermittlung*, (Bielefeld, transcript, 2013), 90.

²¹ Marx and Engels repeatedly took the utopian socialists to task, seeing them as too willing to bracket the necessity of a revolutionary proletarian struggle, and instead all too often “appeal to the purses and the feelings of the bourgeois” (*The Communist Manifesto*). Instead of taking dreams for reality, opponents of capitalist society were urged to find ways to turn its dynamics against itself and thereby accelerate its collapse. Engels later developed the term scientific socialism, an approach founded on “fully comprehending historical conditions” for the cause of proletarian revolution.

²² Hal Foster, “Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism: in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 244.

of their cultural and aesthetic production. "Controlling the context implies controlling of meaning, and controlling meaning is identical with controlling reality."²³

For Youngblood, the revolutionary quality of the new decentralized communication environments, however, is directly related to certain conditions; all users would need to have free access to the means of production: what he calls "personal meta media," as well as full control over distribution networks and infrastructures, the "public meta media."²⁴

Youngblood makes an important 'transfer' in his prospective model: just as industrial production played a central role for the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde, so does immaterial production become central to his conception of the avant-garde of what he considers to be a "post-industrial revolution." The fact of users controlling the production and distribution media, in fact, amounts to a telecommunications revolution, which not only implies a new role for art in building a new society, but also comes very close to the completion of the project of the historical avant-garde. However, what has to be questioned regarding this model is that it ignores the continuing existence of industrial production.

Many years prior to Youngblood, German writer and publisher Hans Magnus Enzensberger had already pointed out the emancipatory potential of digital media networks in his essay *Constituents of a theory of the media*.²⁵ Decentralized media production in which receivers/consumers would be able to turn into senders/producers would mobilize the masses and, thus, instigate political learning, collective production and social control through self-organization. For Enzensberger, however, one of the core issues of his model is that only collective media production can achieve social and political progress:

"For the prospect that in the future, with the aid of the media, anyone can become a producer, would remain apolitical and limited were this productive effort to find an outlet in individual tinkering. Work on the media is possible for an individual only in so far as it remains socially and therefore aesthetically irrelevant. The collection of transparencies from the last holiday trip provides a model. [...] Any socialist strategy for the media must, on the contrary, strive to end the isolation of the individual participants from the social learning and production process. This is impossible unless those concerned organize themselves. This is the political core of the question of the media."²⁶

²³ Ibid., 80.

²⁴ Gene Youngblood, *Metadesign*, in *Kunstforum International*, (Bd.98, 1989), 79.

²⁵ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in *New Left Review*, 1/64, November-December 1970.

²⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

He insists on collectivity as a necessary precondition for an emancipatory use of media – the former bringing with it social relevance, which for him automatically implies aesthetic relevance. As a result, preoccupation with new media may be seen as a threat for bourgeois art and culture:

“It often seems as if it were precisely because of their progressive potential that the media are felt to be an immense threatening power; because for the first time they present a basic challenge to bourgeois culture and thereby to the privileges of the bourgeois intelligentsia – a challenge far more radical than any self-doubt this social group can display.”²⁷

Youngblood and Enzensberger both address some of the core issues that – until today – pertain to an emancipatory use of new technologies and may give some indication of the persistent reservations of the traditional art world against new media.

The reality of art world media

While the utopian models introduced above refer to the implications digital media could have on the conception of art within a networked culture, Andrew Menard and Ron White, contemporaries of Enzensberger, call for attention to the increasing interlocking of media coverage and art production. They insist that “media have completely penetrated to the level of art production” and “the form and content of art is in fact determined by the modes of distribution (media),”²⁸ warning that the emerging glossy art magazines of the 1970s demonstrate that “art media have simply reified distribution by developing as an independent mode of production, a business.”²⁹ Menard and White fault the art trade journals of their day for serving less distribution than a hierarchical redistribution (of information) that benefits their own platforms and those who finance them (advertisers/investors). The authors conclude with a call that prefigures the trial-and-error efforts of THE THING Hamburg:

“If we really don't want to capitulate to the consciousness industry, we have to use media differently. Using media differently means organizing differently. Like technology in general, media aren't inherently good or bad; they merely happen to be used oppressively whenever they are embedded in capitalism.”³⁰

Arguing from the perspective of such an investor- and gallery-financed trade journal targeted by Menard and White, Isabelle Graw offers her perspective on the emancipatory potential of Internet art, the avant-garde and the art market in an essay published in 1998. Expressing apprehension at a “milieu” that is both hyped and its “own world,” distinct from and even dismissive of commercial

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁸ Andrew Menard and Ron White, *Media Madness*, THE FOX #2, (New York, Art and Language Foundation, 1975), 105.

²⁹ Ibid., 108.

³⁰ Ibid., 114.

gallery art, she sets to deconstruct the phenomenon of artist's aesthetic experiments with self-organization on the Net. The concepts of Internet art are, to her, nothing but a "revival" of artistic concepts of the seventies and eighties.³¹ She expresses little enthusiasm for the historical references that defenders of Internet art may make to "the Russian futurists, Dada, Fluxus, or more modestly, to Mail Art," for these strike her as "hasty and not thought-out."³² Sceptically, she asks: "can it not be that working with software limits artists more than, for example, in-stock paint or standardized brush sizes do?"³³ Desperately trying to find arguments that support her dismissal of Internet art, she is not even reluctant to contradict herself by surprisingly concluding that the program of Internet art would realize the long-sought demand of the classic avant-garde, "the demand for an overcoming of the contradiction between art and what Peter Bürger called 'Lebenspraxis' (praxis of life)." The problem is that this achievement draws up short from a cost-benefit analysis: "On the basis of Internet art it becomes apparent that this overcoming yields less than does a maintenance of a notion of art as a specific area."³⁴

Of course, Internet art is not scarce and materially unique, and it also has the same habitat, i.e., the Internet as production and distribution environment as all other websites; it might not immediately be identifiable as art, but what is 'worse' is that it is out of control of the traditional value-ascribing mechanisms of the art world. No wonder that many art critics have come up with attempts to dismiss the art status of such projects: they render these critics obsolete. Graw abuses the historical avant-garde(s) only for the purpose of discrediting that new art form – which, as it turned out, hardly deserved such a comparison in the first place. Indeed, many Internet artists were all too keen to attract art-historical judgment – quite the opposite of fundamentally challenging the art world.

Everyday life of (capitalist) social media

The substantial degree to which social media currently influence everyday communication is obvious. The analog sender/receiver model is about to be replaced by a large-scale model of distributed creation and dissemination of information – one of the central utopias related to digital networked media. A closer look, however, reveals that this media shift is far from a fulfillment of the socio-political utopias of equal creation and dissemination of information as imagined by early media theorists. While social networked knowledge and agency, interaction and exchange, are

³¹ Isabelle Graw, *Man sieht, was man sieht. Anmerkungen zur Netzkunst*. Texte zur Kunst No. 32, December 1998, p. 18, (authors' translation).

³² Ibid., 23.

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ Ibid., 31. Much like Isabelle Graw, Nicolas Bourriaud holds that the institutional space of galleries or contemporary art centers is a prerequisite for art and its affiliated notion of the "formal construction of time-spaces." *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), pp. 86-87. (Authors' translation). He is even more dismissive than Graw of what he terms "those pseudo artists" who "smack on their hard-drives the schemes of thought of the past," judging that IT tools have hardly made any contribution to "actual art." *Formes de Vie* (Paris: Denoel, 1999), p.184. (Authors' translation).

central to networked society, they are concurrently the basis of a new economy, which is based on the appropriation of this collectively yielded work. “Aggressive privatization destroys the preconditions of knowledge and culture,”³⁵ as Felix Stalder puts it, who considers the Internet to have been a laboratory for social innovation during the last 20 years, but also points out that the initial openness of the Internet is currently at risk.

Early Internet art projects such as *The Thing* may have anticipated contemporary forms of exchange and community-building. However, their main purpose was not to generate profit, but rather to think up and experiment with new forms of technology-based anti-institutional and emancipatory organization – on a small scale, of course. In that sense, the everyday socio-technical living conditions we are all experiencing today are not to be mistaken as the fulfillment of any avant-garde aspirations, a vision that Dieter Daniels and Gunther Reisinger put forward: “The strands of utopian thinking of the 1920s and the 1960s held that art anticipates the future and that art transforms, or is transformed, into life; the history of Internet-based art would seem to indicate that it fulfilled both of these utopias.”³⁶ Speculating about the fact that Internet art resisted commodification and, to its credit in their view, did not (just) become another art genre defined by its technology, their notion of a “fulfillment” that has expanded from a small, specialized art field into everyday life is, nonetheless, just as exaggerated as Graw’s speculations. It is worth asking, however, what are the dynamics between *THE THING* Hamburg’s symbolic status as an art project – which were not immediately obvious to anybody – and the real-life effects it spawned.

Art without identity

In a recently published essay reflecting the ‘art and gentrification’ that has occurred under the auspice of IBA (International Building Exhibition) Hamburg, historian Peter Birke dwells on a confession made by the artist collective *Ligna*: that they were incapable of providing effective tools for critique within the IBA project they accepted a commission from. Birke echoes their conclusion that the operation within a context of institutional funding made any critique inoperative, a hypothesis confirmed by his conclusion that no single art project succeeded in gaining critical traction on IBA.³⁷ Implicitly, Birke hereby shares Peter Bürger’s conception of the ‘neo-avantgarde’ (art after the historical avant-garde) being bound in bourgeois society and having no effect on it at all. He concludes, sweepingly: “that which is striking in all the projects mentioned is that there are hardly any works that directly thematize the process of gentrification. That applies both to the IBA-sponsored projects as it does to all other projects.”³⁸ In the course of this very study, however, Birke quotes the *THE THING* Hamburg four times, citing various debates and statements made on the platform. Birke has, interestingly, proved the relevance of *THE THING* Hamburg as a ‘tool’ of

³⁵ Felix Stalder, *Digitale Solidarität*, Rosa Luxemburg foundation website:

<http://netzfueralle.blog.rosalux.de/2012/09/15/felix-stalder-digitale-solidaritat-keynote/> (accessed June 2, 2013).

³⁶ Dieter Daniels and Gunther Reisinger, *net pioneers 1.0*, (Berlin/New York, Sternberg Press, 2009), 6.

³⁷ Peter Birke, *Himmelfahrtskommando Kunst und Gentrifizierung auf den Elbinseln* in: *Arbeitskreis Umstrukturierung Wilhelmsburg*, ed. *Unternehmen Wilhelmsburg Stadtentwicklung im Zeichen von IBA und igs* (Berlin: assoziation A, 2013), 75-76.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 82, (authors' translation).

critique, while leaving unconsidered the possibility that this platform is itself to be considered as art (one that was even financed institutionally). An artwork that fostered debate on and still serves as an archive for the topic that Birke himself is writing about three years later.³⁹

More than an anecdote, this example is an indicator that THE THING Hamburg was less an incarnation of neo-avant-garde art practice than it is an embodiment of what Jean-Claude Moineau has called “art without identity.” For Moineau, “it is an art (without an *oeuvre*) that, in the manner of so-called 'activist' practices, seeks to be active, to act 'for real' – even if 'modestly' – on and within the world instead of obstinately seeking to prettify it or wanting to re-enchant it.”⁴⁰ Just as the challenges of the 1920s deeply modified art-reception, so too does art without identity. “It solicits a non-artistic reception, in the ignorance of its artistic identity, including its identity of art without identity.”⁴¹

It seems that art is often ineffective precisely because its identification as art prevents people from taking the 'tools' it offers seriously – or from adapting them to everyday life. One could, thus, claim that it is not necessarily important to present art in an identifiable form – although, in principle, it should be possible to find out about the roots of a practice. On the other hand, it seems immensely important to define and legitimize this 'art without identity' as an extension of artistic practice, or even as a possible vector of where art could go.

Conclusion

THE THING Hamburg set out to build an independent space, in which artists could experiment with new forms of organization and dissemination of their work, reflect on their working conditions and the pecking order of the art world, expand the notion of what they wanted art to be, and test how they could critically relate to their environment and collaborate with people from other fields. This space was virtual, but as it related to a specific local environment, it also functioned as a laboratory whose experiments reached out into the real life of the city and affected it – and vice versa. It was based on collective production, aiming at involving as many people as possible including non-art publics and, thus, it was a site for political learning.

Collectivity, however, did not mean increasing one's number of ‘friends.’ The platform was rather guided by the conviction that – to quote Hamburg artist Beate Katz – “good art cannot be produced when everyone has to always stay friends.”⁴² THE THING Hamburg steered towards

³⁹ THE THING Hamburg had even solicited a statement from Birke about art and gentrification in 2009, *THE THING Hamburg* website: <http://www.thing-hamburg.de/index.php?id=938#c1328> (accessed June 3, 2013).

⁴⁰ Jean-Claude Moineau, *Contre l'Art Global. Pour un Art sans Identité* (Alfort: Ere, 2007), 132.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 134 (authors' translation).

⁴² The quote stems from a sticker produced by Beate Katz that has been reproduced and referred to in Rahel Puffert, “Die Kunst der vielen Unbekannten/The Art of the Many Unknown,” in *Art in Public Space Styra: Projects 2010*, eds Werner Fenz, Evelyn Kraus and Birgit Kulturer, 52-61 (Vienna and New York: Springer, 2012).

controversy, arguments, and dispute and – on more than a few occasions – even making ‘enemies.’ In this sense, the project contributed to a culture of contention, which is the basis of any democratization process; something that is hard to find in the art world. From this perspective, it is perhaps THE THING Hamburg’s greatest ‘success’ that in a relatively short period of time it consolidated the various critical currents in the city and rendered them visible.

Running the project on public funding was a condition that allowed us not only to be in control of our own infrastructure, but also to pay and get paid for work and content related to the platform. While this put us in a permanent conflict (and contradiction) with the authorities who assigned the funding, we considered the ongoing negotiations as part of our aim to expand the notion of what is accepted as art.

The wide range of practices that are not compatible with the business-as-usual of exhibitions, the gallery-driven exchange of communication and money, and the discursive power of art theorists and museum experts can only operate outside or in conflict with the system; there are no spaces within the traditional art world in which timely applications of art can be negotiated. Therefore, it is even more important to look for and create spaces in which this ‘can’ happen.

Although THE THING Hamburg was an experiment based on networked technologies, its focus was not on the development of technology as it was for the early The Thing, for example. We rather used the tools available to enable new social relations – ones that foster critical speech – and thus “renewing art” by bringing together technology, art and politics. However, there were limits set to our experiment of building infrastructure as art; it seems that it had to cease exactly because it was successful, because it started to have a social impact, with this leading to the eventual revocation of its art status.