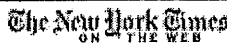


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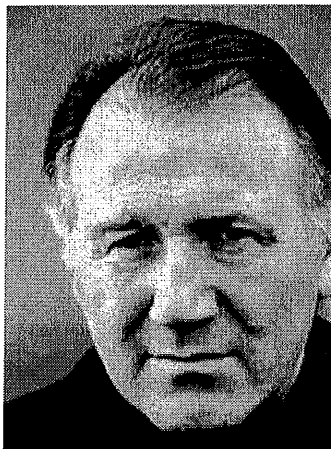
By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

*"The New York Times" article*

Director's Futuristic Agenda Keeps Art Center on Edge (1999)

In the 1960's, Peter Weibel was a member of the Vienna Actionists, a gang of rebellious artists who shocked the European establishment with avant-garde performances featuring bullwhips, barbed wire and lots of blood.

These days, Weibel is part of the establishment. Already a prominent curator, author and teacher, he has served since January as the director of the Center for Art and Media Technology (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, or ZKM), in Karlsruhe, Germany.



Peter Weibel, director of the Center for Art and Media Technology.

But Weibel (pronounced VIE-bell) still cannot resist the opportunity shake things up. Just four months into his job at ZKM, he is advancing a futuristic new agenda for the massive arts complex, which opened in a converted munitions factory only 18 months ago.

"The best way to start something is not always the best way to continue something," Weibel said.

During a recent telephone interview, Weibel laid out his plans for ZKM, which include a shift away from displaying historical artifacts and a greater emphasis on helping artists produce new work. "The point is, we are called a center, not a museum," he said.

Creative energies at ZKM are as likely to be devoted to new-media technology as artistic end-products, Weibel said. He will seek academic and industrial partners for research into "distributed virtual reality" and other projects that, as he described them, sometimes sounded closer to science fiction than science.

For example, Weibel asserted: "People are looking for a new physics of the image. They don't want to stay anymore with, say, flat screens, which are absolutely stable. Why not invent a screen you can bend like paper?"

Weibel also is making a major commitment to the Internet, starting with an overhaul of the institution's Web site. ZKM has just announced it will join with three other high-tech art centers this fall to present "Net\_Condition," an exhibition designed to place Internet-based art within the context of the avant-garde. Weibel is selecting the two dozen artists who will be commissioned for the show.

Tilman Baumgaertel, a Berlin-based critic whose book on Internet art will be published this summer, said ZKM's recognition of the genre is overdue.

"ZKM has completely missed the whole development of the Internet. Even their Web site was weak," Baumgaertel said. "ZKM is financed by the government to maintain and foster media culture, so it has a big responsibility in this area. I think the biggest challenge for them as an institution will be to figure out a way to deal with this new digital culture."

ZKM was founded in 1989 by Heinrich Klotz, who oversaw the \$93 million conversion of the factory into a state-of-the-art structure with its own production facilities, recording studio, video library and 130,000 square feet of exhibition space. Two of its largest components are the Institute for Visual Media and the Institute of Music and Acoustics, which are host to residency programs for artists and musicians.

After the ZKM building opening in October 1997, Klotz stepped aside to run its Museum for Contemporary Art, which has about 500 works, including pieces by Rauschenberg, Warhol,

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Polke and the video artist Nam June Paik. It will expand next year when it merges with another collection.

From the outset, ZKM has had a unique mission: instead of isolating new-media works in a museum's electronic ghetto or exiling them to an arcade-like playground, the goal was to position the works in a broader context by showing them next to pieces from traditional disciplines like painting and sculpture.

Weibel said this approach would not be altered under his direction, and that public exhibits would continue to be important for attracting visitors -- who currently number between 2,000 and 3,000 per day, higher than anticipated -- to ZKM.

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**"The museum of the future will also have the function of the studio. You will select an artist not only to show a work, you will select an artist to produce a work."**

Peter Weibel

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the function of the studio. You will select an artist not only to show a work, you will select an artist to produce a work."

But Weibel argued that, despite significant improvements, the technology of the image is still rooted in cinema, a 19th century invention, and that it is time for artists to turn their creative efforts toward the technology itself.

At the same time, he believes modern museums, when they are not grasping for attendance, are too mired in the practice of conserving artifacts.

"The function of a museum is not anymore just to be a support system -- works of art do not vanish -- but it also must be the function of the museum to support acts of creation," Weibel said. "The museum of the future will also have

Weibel enthusiastically sketched out the research scenarios that interest him, like a field of polymer-based grass that could be commanded via computer to crumple as though a rabbit were bounding across it.

"You would have the material footprint of something which you don't see," Weibel said. He added that the "flexible fluid action" of these stalks might lead to the development of artificial fingers that could curl in all directions.

In discussions, he repeatedly referred to quantum computers, hypothetical devices that might perform a billion times faster than today's supercomputers by crunching data at a sub-molecular level.

But Weibel was most captivated by the concept of distributed virtual reality, which will enable participants in remote locations to share the same experience simultaneously. "The Net is just beginning of the transition to what I call shared cyberspace," he said. "People all over the world will be able to interact in the same virtual space."

Eventually, Weibel would like the revamped "ZKM Online" site to fulfill that function.

"It's important that people come here," he explained, "but I would prefer it that people say, 'I'm sitting here now in Sao Paulo or Hong Kong and I want to know something about a specific aspect of media art and media technology, and there is one center where I can click in and find that information.'"

The ZKM site will soon feature a symbol to signify the increased importance of the Internet to the institution: a new, interactively changing logo composed of ASCII characters. "It will be the first corporate identity that will be derived from the online universe," he said, "not from the paper universe, which is our past."

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The Internet will also gain greater prominence in the center's exhibition halls when the "Net\_Condition" exhibit opens in September. As part of the show, a "spatial Web browser" will display about 30 sites across a 66-foot-long wall.

Weibel's interest in networked environments extends past the Internet and into his professional life. He characterized his management style as team-oriented, and said he would establish a network of curators to augment the expertise of his own staff.

Similarly, he would like to open small satellite galleries in Berlin and the Chelsea neighborhood of New York to showcase works created at ZKM.

To accomplish his goals, Weibel must withstand the usual bureaucratic battles that members of the establishment routinely face from both inside and outside the institution. Ebullient and frank in conversation, he seemed ready for the task.

Although Weibel is not widely known in the United States, he is highly regarded in Europe for his theoretical and historical writings. From 1986 until 1995, Weibel served as director of the high-profile Ars Electronica festival in Linz, Austria, and he has taught for a number of years at the University for Applied Arts in Vienna. His curatorial responsibilities include the Austrian pavilion at the upcoming Venice Biennale.

Why, then, would he take on the challenge of recreating ZKM as, in his words, a laboratory for modern art?

"For two reasons," he replied, "If I'm lucky, ZKM can be a good instrument for combining all of these activities. Secondly, I always strive to put myself in situations where I feel unstable at the beginning."

"Maybe with ZKM I will find that I have reached the border. But I always have this impulse to transgression."

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- [Center for Art and Media Technology](#) (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie)

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Matthew Mirapaul at [mirapaul@nytimes.com](mailto:mirapaul@nytimes.com) welcomes your comments and suggestions.

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