As an artist and a curator, Peter Weibel has been an important actor in establishing a practice in new media art. But his extensive critical writing and publishing within the field has also been vital for the emerging critical theory of new media and the new information society. Since 1999 he has been the chairman of ZKM in Karlsruhe, one of the most prestigous institututions for media art in Europe. Stephan Geene met Peter Weibel to discuss the relation of art and technology, the marginalisation of critical art in the global entertainment industry and the possiblities of developing new museological models for a new media art.

Downloading the mind

(2000)

BY STEPHAN GEENE

[20 –27]

Stephan Geene: In the past, you have done various things; you were artist, publicist, organiser of symposiums, and curator. Now you are the chairman of the ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie/Centre for Art and Media Technology, Karlsruhe) and responsible for so-called media art. You have been operating within the clearly-defined framework of the assigned task, to 'culturalize technology'. How do you comprehend this situation yourself?

Peter Weibel: The state of free-floating intelligence, in which I worked as an artist or intellectual, changed due to my increasing work for institutions; you then no longer only live off the free market. Now, as chairman of an institution, the entire administrative and managerial burden lies on me. At the ZKM, which I took over about one a half years ago, I am subject to such strong institutional constraints that I will keep to the 5-year contract, but certainly not extend it. The political pressure I am exposed to makes work very difficult.

SG: What did you originally expect from the task?

PW: As an artist or curator, you always work in the hope of being able to realise something with an institution, which would not be possible without it. However, it seems to be increasingly difficult to realise the idea of a periodical on current media issues, for example, or a book series.

SG: The ZKM is not just any institution, but one that establishes a very specific relationship between technology and culture – and you certainly didn't require the ZKM to publish. You do so quite extensively, anyway.

PW: All hope is not yet lost – the chance would lie in developing a museological model for Germany and Europe. As opposed to France, Germany has no relationship to modernism. It's alarming to see how Mr. Naumann (the permanent secretary for culture) is trying to introduce a national representation culture in the name of Berlin as a cultural capital. Even today, Germany still does not have a single genuine museum for modern art. MOMA, for example, understands modern art, based on constructivism, Bauhaus, and DeStijl, as a universal vocabulary which can be utilised in painting, sculpture, design, architecture, film, and typography alike, and has respective departments and collections of films, graphics, and books. The Centre Pompidou even possesses a virtual collection. Considering its basic idea, the ZKM has the prospects of becoming a museological model. This task, which only I perceived, is what enticed me.

SG: To whom do you feel responsible? Aren't you assuming a nationalistic, cultural framework and arguing in the interest of national, location-oriented competition aimed at modernising Germany?

PW: When you work as a curator or theoretician, you are always obliged to the younger generation. As curator or theoretician, it is important, along the lines of the generation agreement, to offer a forum for problematic areas that the younger generation recognises and works on.

SG: You could also say that you were responsible to specific movements within society, which you intend to give a certain space.

PW: I only addressed Germany for the reason that the money for this institution – even if it's not enough – comes from German sources. For quite some time now, I have not only been interested in the axis North America – Europe; I have dealt with exhibitions on global migration, neo-colonialism, etc. Here in Europe, we have high-tech media art, but what would low-tech media art look like in Slovenia, Russia, or the Urals?

SG: Competitive, location-oriented globalisation with a universal ethics of responsibility does not make this approach all too different from what's happening today in corporate culture. They're open to everything as well.

PW: One shouldn't use the word globalisation in an indiscriminate way, that's true. Often I prefer to say non-local. Apart from local artists, there are artistic practices in South America or South Africa that have an entirely different cultural background, historical experience, and concept of art, which comes up against our local views in a discursive way, relativising them and thus changing them. There are a lot of books on the subject of the body. But as far as I can see, no one has taken such a close look at the media-related conditions of representation in the age of reproductive technologies. This is the aim of the exhibition *Der Anagrammatische Körper* (The Anagrammatical Body). Here, the very precise argument is made that the central point of change of the bodily image in art is the anagram, meaning the alphabetisation of the body, in the way it also corresponds to the metaphor of the alphabetisation of life in the genome projects. Seventy years ago, art already made reference to this in a very critical manner, before it was even perceived by the public. There are no art books showing us that 20th century art, from Picasso to Bacon in painting, or from Heartfield to Cindy Sherman in photomontage, has developed an incredibly gruesome, almost repulsive image of the body, and

that the beautiful body has been left to the mass media and the beauty industry, I haven't seen this objective anywhere, and therefore this exhibition, which presents that artistic ambition, is suppressed. They don't want to admit that art has freed itself from the illusion of the beautiful body a long time ago. At the same time, they know the audience has a great and legitimate longing for it. In order to meet and exploit this demand, they call people like Richard Avedon or Helmut Newton, who actually work for the beauty industry, artists. But these photographers have nothing to do with art, they're in a totally different category.

SG: That the body is anagrammatical and has to do with language has been generally accepted for 10 years. In addition, it is common knowledge that art in the post-war period was very much characterised by ugliness. But that you are not willing to show the entire current art market, which is extremely determined by the connection between neo-pop, photography, and fashion, and categorically restrict the field art ought to deal with – that does amaze me.

PW: The young art scene, especially in England, is attempting to reanimate positions given up by modernism. These young curators want to re-establish something, in Latin it's called 'restaurare'. In my critique, I make reference to positions like those of the Situationists or Baudrillard, which are by no means shelved; they describe something which is still crucial for society.

SG: But I do see the relationships between subjectivity and the world of commodities, which Baudrillard theorises, thematised in the works you criticise.

PW: In the new economy, production and product are no longer as important as consumption. A publishing-house which has understood this will no longer go ahead and say it has a product called a book. Instead, it will show half-naked young people jumping around happily and then write: "Be here. Penguin". Half of London is currently full of these posters. Therefore, someone like Norman Rosenthal of the Royal Academy of Art, who organised the exhibition *Sensation*, can't go any further: the artists are already all used up as pop stars, he can no longer exhibit them, he must bring on real pop stars. His next exhibition will

are by no means simple. But to get to the skills you suggested: don't you contradict yourself when you describe art as something that must be safeguarded against self-dissolution, but which on the other hand only legitimises itself by acquiring skills from fields other than art? In many of your texts, you reduce art to an epiphenomenon of media history anyway. What's there to be saved?

PW: The diagnosis is identical. Art is faced with the problem of becoming marginal. One way out lies in art as entertainment industry, then at least it has an audience, even if it loses epistemological and social significance. Marginalisation is a given fact. One must think about how art can gain epistemological and social significance. One possible path could lie in intervening in debates that are of epistemological and social interest. Feminist and visual studies are at the end of a long development in which a comprehensive apparatus has been created in fields outside of art and which is better capable of comprehending art than classical art theory. Many artists such as Renée Green, Martha Rosler, or Adrian Piper have written essays in this field themselves.

SG: One could, however, argue about why there is allegedly no element of critique of knowledge in design. Why do you then not build the ZKM up as a sociological, feminist, deconstructivist institution? That would be possible. Instead, you continue refering to art as the point of departure, and the other fields merely have the function of guaranteeing the quality of the art works. Thus, you again detach social activities from the social field.

PW: You're partially right, for two reasons: there are superb magazines and publishing houses for feminism, etc. We set these things in relation to the field of science. I don't want to compete with these institutions. The differentiation you demand made it necessary, especially here, to examine these things in relation to technology. Secondly, this field cannot be left solely to visual studies. We also develop things in co-operation with other institutions, totally new technologies, which are then made accessible for the artists – that's one of the possibilities the ZKM has. One of the demands towards the ZKM's competence lies in offering the artists to turn to us, if technical problems occur.

has clear limits, and that the visions projected into infinity of what is possible are unjustified. Today, it is no longer the case that one expects physics to turn matter into energy, as in Star Trek. And this might happen to genetic engineering as well. Of course there is such a thing as genetics. But it doesn't exist in a definable sense, for example, because structurally there can be no meaningful limit to what a genome is. Detaching genetic information from its carrier can only be performed rhetorically; in practice, however, it doesn't exist in this field. The claim you make that there is a dichotomy and a detachment of mind and body is a heuristic position which cannot be legitimised scientifically and which merely repeats the political standards of the industry.

PW: The decisive change since tele-technology, asserted time and time again, the separation of information and carrier, that's something you don't see? You say, technological performance is finite. Regarding this point, our views lie wide apart. One example: there's this famous principle by Maltus, who discovered the problem of over-population. If the world population grew to the extent foreseeable at the time – and in reality, it exploded much worse – then Caesarism would occur, in which a single person decides who will get something to eat and who will not. Otherwise, people will die in large numbers, as the growth of the population will bring with it a shortage of food which cannot be overcome. He was right in seeing that, given the food industry of his time, the population could not be fed. What he couldn't perceive, however, is what chemistry would invent. The technological sphere was able to bridge the gap and stimulate the food chain to a degree that it can feed 8 million people. This is not happening enough, it's not sufficient, and not distributed equally. It all has to do with these questions. There certainly is great poverty, but still, 8 million people are being fed, and there is no Caesarism. 100 years ago, no one could say that there would be electricity. There were some tests on frog legs and so forth, but that electricity could be tamed, that with electricity the entire world could be lit up, nobody could predict that. Some people are born ill, others aren't. The inequalities that nature causes must become resolvable. Technology has the possibility of resolving these inequalities and must constantly be examined in regard to its emancipatory potential.

SG: But there are no indications that genetic engineering, for example, in view of the facts currently known, justifies these promises. The example of electricity also works in the opposite direction. It wasn't predictable, but what it rather shows, is that perhaps the future of technology originates someplace completely different than the current social framework pre-determines, creating a completely different concept of technology. Your example of Maltus is horrible. Maltus' analyses are in themselves already racist. How did Maltus, from his European perspective, want to know how feeding would develop in continents he hardly knew anything about? They were, as is generally known, scientifically-clad projections onto the 'primitives'. Simply adopting such concepts as "population explosion" – in the

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then no longer show artists, but Chris Cunningham or one of the big advertising photographers. As soon as artists adopt practices from popular culture, they subject themselves to its preconditions and make themselves superfluous. Instead, artists should intervene in the social, political, economical, or scientific realms, or seek alliances there. That's were competence and skills can be gained.

SG: Slavoj Zizek, who you have also invited and published, theorises exactly the necessity and the intelligence which can lie in enjoying commodity fetishes, even though one sees through them as being stupid. Such forms of subjectivity

SG: Your public statements on new media and genetic engineering are extremely affirmative: your statement in the Spiegel, that the body is actually superfluous and technologically replaceable, is a downright anti-feminist classic. I would, however, contradict your trust in the possibilities of performance in genetic-engineering from the stance of scientific 'competence'. Your position is more techno/colonial than post-colonial.

PW: What is your personal opinion on technological performance?

SG: I think the status quo of genetic-engineering research more likely implies that the paradigm

image of "explosion", entire parts of the world population become excess bio-mass – is, for me, the opposite of a 'deconstructivist' critique of facts.

PW: How can one explain this AIDS crisis? My answer is, contrary to everything I read, a false understanding of science. Immunology was dismissed as useless by most juries and authorities. From leprosy to tuberculosis, everything was overcome, so immunology was called an 'orchid science'. As opposed to atomic research etc., it was granted no money. The commissions followed a false concept of science. By bowing to political and social pressure, science lost 30 to 40 years of research work. Now they're paying for it. When AIDS appeared, no one was prepared, and what little has been achieved was thanks to these poor, ridiculed researchers. That's the core of the problem. Had a liberal scientific policy been pursued, we would today have a flourishing immunology. As paradoxical as it may sound, Africa's present-day misery is partially due to the Western world not having cared about immunology. The persons affected must intervene here, and these things are developing, e.g. in groups whose families suffer from Alzheimer's disease. They force doctors to let them take part in research. My point is that science and doctors must be monitored by certain interest groups or users.

SG: The story of AIDS in Africa can just as well be told the other way around. Your claim that the central point of the AIDS crisis lies somewhere else other than assumed until now, namely in immunology, is one of many alternative explanatory approaches which all have the problem of reproducing the form of knowledge as more or less well-founded assertion of an alleged truth of the problem. Instead, it should be recognized that there are incredibly huge knowledge gaps in regard to the origin and the characteristics of the so-called pathogen: do all registered cases in Africa really have to do with AIDS? To what extent are diseases caused by poverty subsumed under AIDS? All theories explaining AIDS are inconsistent, inherently and with each other. That doesn't do away with AIDS, but this lack of knowledge must be comprehended as a factor constituting diseases, not only as a temporary lack of knowledge which everyone thinks they can solve. But keeping paradigms open would be what could play a role in the context of art, as well; art as competence to move about in inconclusive, decision-making processes.

PW: I didn't say that, I didn't get to that.

SG: You did. "Downloading the mind", the primacy of the mind or the code over the body, which you repeatedly assert, implies this. As does your assumption that genetic engineering can undo injustices in bodily development. That implies total performance.

PW: That is true, my explanations are limited to the technological aspect. Others can contribute other aspects. That's the aspect the history of science can contribute. I stress an open scientific practice and demand that those affected have a say, the artists, the man from the street, the citizenhood. I ask myself: here's technological devel-

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opment, here's society, and how can a civil society, in which each subject has the same rights, mediate between the two with the help of this ideal of technology – of genetic engineering, too? I'm not against it from the start. What potential does this technology possess to collaborate in achieving this ideal?

SG: What can you, at the ZMK, contribute?

PW: My media theory makes the assumption that most media carry on the work of writing. I'm

utopian, technological, social models. In this I see a contribution to civil society.

SG: Did you have this positive identification with civil society before, when you worked as an artist in the tradition of the avant-garde? Didn't you have a quite different, more particularistic concept of society and interests?

PW: Actually not. At the time, the concept of revolution was more open. I thought radical art could effect a radical change. At the time, I
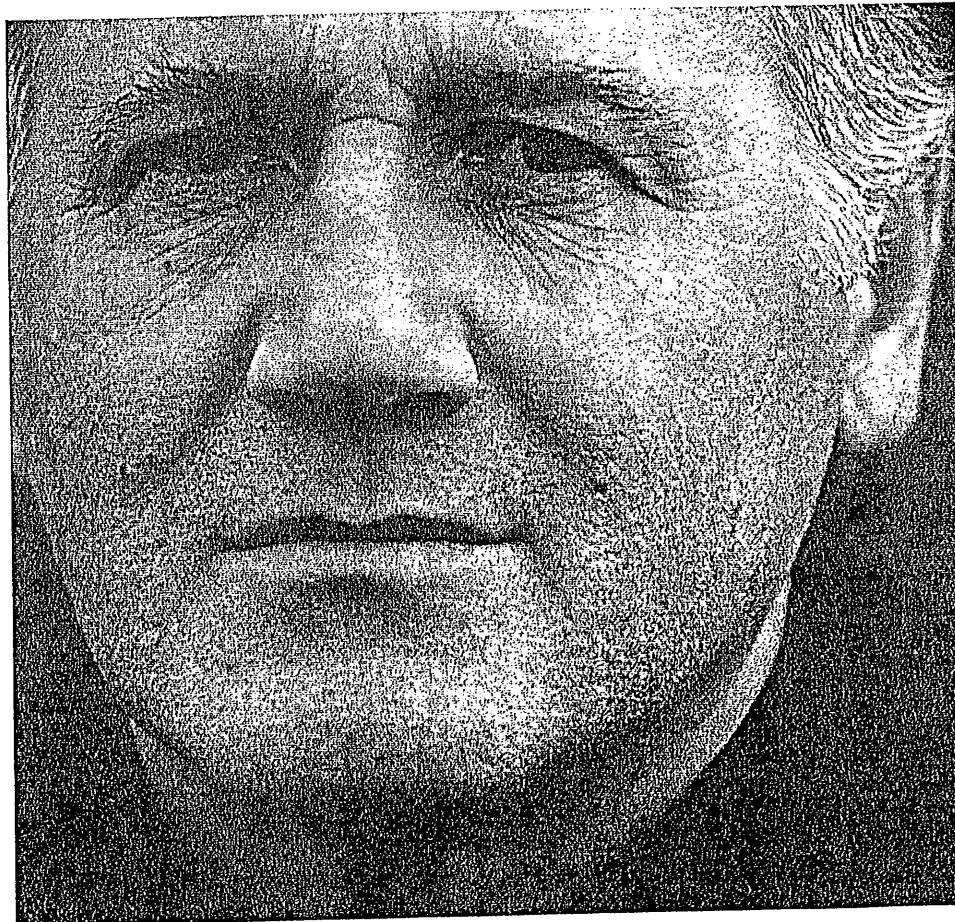
Peter Weibel, Photo: ONUK ©: ZKM, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologi

always interested, no matter if it's film, video, computer, or music, in the aspect of absence. Media bring something closer which is temporally or spatially at a distance, even if only as a simulation. In the projects of the next 2-3 years, I attempt to define what the future of these media, of literature, of the text, of books, of cinema, could be like. The attempt will be made, in the research as well as the exhibition area, to again create

thought more radical ideas needed to be developed. Today, I'm already happy when the courts are able to implement the social contract. What is written there has not yet been fulfilled. So I try to do in reality what has already been reached consensually. In earlier times, I wanted to go beyond the consensus; today, I would be happy, if it were realised. ∎

—Stephan Geene