

ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN POLAND



**FROM CYBERCOMMUNISM
TO THE CULTURE OF MAKERS**

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY IN POZNAŃ

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH SERIES No 35

ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN POLAND

FROM CYBERCOMMUNISM TO THE CULTURE OF MAKERS

edited by

Agnieszka Jelewska



POZNAŃ 2014

Conclusion: Symbiotic tangles

In the emerging, highly programmed landscape ahead, you will either create the software or you will bet he software. It's really that simple: Program, or be programmed. Choose the former, and you gain access to the control panel of civilization. Choose the latter, and it could be last real choice you get to make.¹

Douglas Rushkoff

There is no doubt that it is difficult to create a whole and model description of a given phenomenon when its development phases are being shaped. Today we face a whole range of new practices, tendencies and periodic events, which have been discussed in this book individually by different authors and all of which compose a dynamic and a non-uniform landscape of techno-culture. An important feature of this publication is the fact that individual findings have been made by internal users, i.e. direct co-makers of the described tendencies. Therefore, an external, critical analysis of these phenomena shows up mainly in between individual texts – in the entirety of the publication – and it indicates the variety of analytical tools and theoretical models or methods used to define specific tendencies. The transformation from cyber-communism times to the contemporary culture of makers, as recorded in this book, and its approach to connecting the arts and sciences has overlapped in our country with democratisation processes. Apart from the obvious fact that system changes occurred after 1989 – the term “democratisation” that we use engulfs the additional change in the methods of defining and utilising technical media. In the 1990s we could experience to a large extent the situation of a consumption-focused approach to the sphere of media, but in the new millennium, together with the emergence of strictly independent DIY environments, the media have hugely been subjected to new democratisation processes. The social approach to their function in artistic circles has changed, as well as the methods and strategies of media utilisation – expressed in turn for “recovering” the technological domain for social purposes. One must notice that to a certain extent these are tendencies which are reminiscent of events taking place in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and which were focused around the Californian

¹ Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age*, New York 2010, pp. 7–8.

avant-garde and individual groups in San Francisco². Nowadays, actions based on shaping the forms of media exchange or of recovering specialised military technology for artistic and social purposes have a much broader scope and thanks to network communication they exceed national boundaries, thus becoming a global tendency. New methods of “hacking” the media are of key importance in this respect as they allow local communities to establish their own communications structures, to build their own technological interfaces, and to educate themselves through “cheap” (meaning open source) technology. Media democratisation, therefore, gives the opportunity to choose between participating in the consumer culture of large producers and to turn to independent systems created in line with the slogans of the first hackers from the 1960s. That is also why such issues as network hacking or access to free culture have become extremely complicated today, as, on the one hand, they are immersed in a still ailing legislation, and, on the other hand, in the spheres of interest of large players of consumer culture. The possibility to make a choice between fitting into commercial models and democratised practices is extremely important – especially in Poland, in which right after system changes and developing a new political-democratic identity we must constitute ourselves in the reality of digital globalisation. And, in relation to these processes, new art has an extremely important role to play. Contemporary artistic practices, regardless of whether they are officially introduced into the art domain or, on the contrary, consciously operate on its boundaries, address these most important issues. Not mentioning them, leaving them out of the humanist, philosophical discourse, which is often experienced in Poland, increases the effect, referred to by Lawrence Lessig, of media illiteracy, which is the lack of skills to use modern tools responsibly, and which results in producing a society of hyper-consumers.³ New artistic practices are focused on actions within the aforementioned techno-culture, which is a combination of what used to be defined as separate areas and today has to be presented jointly as a phenomenon expressing the changes that have taken place in contemporary times. In this book we tried to show the relationship and connections between art, science and technology by taking into account the determining influence this hybrid combination is having on transformations in social life. On the grounds of numerous doubts and understatements occurring between society and techno-scientific systems, increasingly important artistic practices are starting to emerge which are defined all over the world as *art&science*. In recent years there have been many phenomena in this area in Polish art. New artists have emerged on the artistic scene who in many cases do not even have a college education in the arts or even in the humanities at all. Among them we shall find not only designers but also programmers or engineers. And even if they are art college graduates, they still supplement their artistic practice with new technology competencies. On the one hand, this is a return to practice which we could generally call *techné*, but, on

² See Agnieszka Jelewska, *Ekotopie. Ekspansja technokultury*, Poznań 2013.

³ See Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture*, New York 2004, [online], available from: <http://www.free-culture.cc/freeculture.pdf> [accessed: 6 December 2013].

the other hand, the advanced tools used by the artists (no matter if these are programming or designing tools) are subjected in many of their actions to a deep analysis. Critical strategies with respect to such practices connected with widely perceived technological art are not absolutely clear. The criticism often becomes very direct – just like in the works of Robert B. Lisek – showing the abuses and manipulation possibilities connected with a techno-capitalist system; whereas in the works of such artists as Paweł Janicki the critical level is hidden in the designing mechanisms, which reveal spheres of hidden information circulating the network in the process itself. The youngest generation often reaches for other strategies – connected with the recovery of technology; for example, the panGenerator group design their technological interfaces by recalling *open source* technology. This way, such devices are created which can potentially be made independently by each user, thus utilising the Internet support of the *makers* environment. In this case, criticism is reflected in rejecting the world of corporate technologies and in choosing technologies from the domain of DIY (do-it-yourself), free from supervising commercial mechanisms. The latest of these strategies has gained in strength and is one of the most characteristic features of contemporary society of knowledge. Workshops, *shares*, co-working spaces, fab-labs, social workshops – have all become forms of small independent institutions constructing techno-culture practices in the bottom-up style. In this context it is a value in itself to reject the role of the consumer and to become a creative designer making one's own hardware and software. This type of action does not only have a dimension of the pragmatic creation of "customised" electronics (such which fulfil the individual aims of the maker), but in reality this is something much larger – it is a deep criticism of the digital consumer culture in which most users move along paths predefined by corporate-political strategies. Such a culture is in danger of passivity, and even if it provides us with quasi-creative tools (e.g. software for artistic work), it still leaves us on lost ground, i.e. expressed in the limitation of: I will only do as much as the tools designed by someone else allow me to do. Therefore, an important element of artistic actions today is not only to make objects and to create artistic experiences themselves, but also the author's own tools, which break free from the consumer society without licence complications arising from the usage of commercial equipment or software which do not define the artistic workshop. That is how the makers' culture is established, i.e. a culture of people consciously shaping technological tools, practising a new level of democratisation as a form of media recovery and exchange, and subjecting in this way to an analysis all deep structures of culture rather than their visible consequences in the form of ready-made products. In this context, practising art on the verge of science and technology has a performative dimension, i.e. in redefining techno-culture in a process in which art itself originates. From this perspective, digital art itself often adopts the functions of a meta-system using meta-aesthetics. This allows the redefinition of forms of artistic expression in the new media reality.

Similarly important is art actively utilising scientific cognition strategies. In a reality in which science fulfils functions conditioning the development of civilisation and its isola-

tion from social or cultural systems, this may lead to ostracism with respect to modernity and misunderstanding the world we live in. Scientific laboratories operate within culture as exterritorial places, as autonomous outposts managed by their own rights and logic. This situation, however, may pose a danger with such intensive scientific development going on. Scientific acceleration must take place in a relationship with the evolving society, and in this scheme art plays an extremely important role of a translator and mediator – on the one hand, it develops the social-cultural foundations for expected scientific breakthroughs, and, on the other hand, it has the potential for critical immersion into closed laboratory structures.

The Interdisciplinary Research Centre Humanities/Arts/Technology (HAT Research Center) that we established in 2011 at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań is a response to the urgent need in Poland to build a bridge between the contemporary humanities and techno-scientific reality. This situation provokes us to reach not only for tools of academic discourse but also for practices characteristic of techno-culture. In the past few years, many workshops, lectures, projects and exhibitions have been conducted within the operations of the HAT Research Center. Among them there have been such events as workshops with youth titled *We, The Children from Project Earth*, within which we jointly revalidated private histories from the perspective of the Anthropocene theory, lectures and meetings with foreign guests, e.g. with Prof. Roy Ascott or Prof. Jill Scott, or an international conference titled *Post-Technology Experiences*. In 2013 we curated *Art-Science-Culture*, with a series of exhibitions from the art&science area, as well as the exhibition titled *Transnature Is Here*, attended by Przemysław Jasielski, Rafał Zapala, Marek Straszak, Tomasz Gęstwicki, Szymon Kaliski and Patryk Lichota. In this project we confronted artists with breakthrough research achievements in the area of bio-communication, bio-acoustics, cognitivist science and scientific philosophy. The project, during which we jointly tried to address new definitions of intelligence, life, communication and the place of humans among other live (live and not-live) systems of being on Earth, provoked many discussions and became, in a way, an intellectual mechanism of understanding the techno-artistic-scientific reality. For us this has been proof that artistic, designing, curator, critic and scientific work creates a symbiotic organism of the contemporary humanities in which isolated theories are difficult to be defended and practical actions become a type of test verifying the durability of a specific structure. In this context, the humanities become clear only in connection with new artistic practice, scientific theories and technological tools in the process of joint negotiating of the shape of reality.



We, The Children from Project Earth, Agnieszka Jelewska, Michał Krawczak, Wielkopolska Revolutions 2014

