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Questions Concerning Art, Technology & War Unrelated to One Another. Dr Jürg Gutknecht interviewed by media artist Art Clay

Art Clay

Art Clay: John Cage said, that because of the constant development that technology is continuously undergoing, that in the end it would make itself obsolete due to redundancy. Do you feel that technology is a just a means, so to speak a continuous game with no end result, or do you fell it to be a means to end, so to speak a way to the birth of a balanced society? Could the same goal be reached without technology?

Jürg Gutknecht: I am not sure if I understand Cage's reasoning. Before giving my own interpretation, let me recall that the word "technology" descends from the Greek word "techne" which means "something beyond nature that only humans are able to do". Therefore, apart from the strange ending "logy" (that adds a touch of "meta" and "science"), "technology" is basically synonymous with "art". Not surprisingly, my colleague Niklaus Wirth once called the discipline of programming (my field of expertise) a "constructive art". Now, of course, the more integrated art in society is, the more it disappears (or seams to disappear) but this is a state to strive for rather than to regret. It reminds me of the "era of the disappearing computer" anticipated by Marc Weiser, former head of the famous Xerox PARC research lab. In a seminal talk Weiser said that "the most profound technologies are those that disappear".

Reverting to the original question, I can summarize that I consider technology as an integral and unavoidable constituent of any intelligent life.

A. C. : Albert Einstein has written that the third World War will be fought with nuclear weapons, but all following wars with sticks and stones. Considering the above statement, do you consider the role of technology in modern society having negative consequences and that perhaps we should not have invented the wheel to begin with?

J. G. : Referring to my answer to the first question, technology is not invented. It is an integral part of our modern society. As such, it unavoidably does have positive as well as negative consequences (or better, consequences that we consider as positive and consequences that we consider as negative). Technology is just one manifestation of the polarity of our earthly life, and we better accept it as a challenge. Albert Einstein was amazingly accurate with his prediction. Modern wars are fought as computer games. However, this is just art in different clothes.

A. C. : It has often been said that most technologies used by society in a civil-manner are hand-downs from military applications. Do you think that it could be possible to develop technologies for civil applications, for example in the arts, first and with the same financial backing an urgency as that for the military?

J. G. : Joseph Weizenbaum, the famous computing pioneer and critic, believes no. He was quite frustrated when he became aware of the "hidden agenda" at the MIT Media lab. However, pragmatically, does it really matter so much if technology is pushed with the primary intention of increasing military power and "misused" for peaceful purposes, or with the primary intention of supporting civil applications and maliciously used for war? Notabene, no hammer has ever been produced with the intention of providing a killer instrument and quantum physics has not been invented with the goal of building atom bombs. At last, the sheer existence of institutions like the Media lab is undoubtedly an asset for the world.
A. C.: The sound-art work, GoingPublik uses as a controller a mobile phone. How does the technology used here differ to that used in the bombing of trains in Madrid by terrorists?

J. G.: It is exactly the same difference as the difference between a knife used by a cook and a knife used by a murderer: none.

A. C.: How has having an artist, like Art Clay working closely with members of the ETH Zurich affected the work being done at that Institute and has the direct application of technologies being developed there, been in anyway affected either in their rate of progress or intended application?

J. G.: The Artists appeared as a silver line on the horizon. Their major role is challenging our research and technology rather than directing or redirecting it. While it is easy (and has become quite common) for computer scientists to solve their own, carefully and iteratively self-made problems within the often cited ivory tower, the vision of a creative non-computer scientist typically provides a hard nut to crack. In addition, both artists successfully act as natural motivator, animator and integrator. The awareness of an unavoidably approaching hour of truth (the performance) are making an inter-departmental team of collaborators pulling together. I can hardly imagine doing constructive systems research in "new media" without artist partners.

A. C.: Professor Gutknecht, thank you very much for taking the time to answer questions.

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Art Clay is a sound artist living in Basel, Switzerland. A specialist in the performance of self created works with the use of intermedia, he has appeared at international festivals, on radio and television in Europe, USA and Japan.

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