

## SELECTED BY: MALTE HAGENER

OLIVER GRAU (ED.), *MEDIAARTHISTORIES*,  
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Gérard Genette and others have taught us that titles of books, like paratexts in general, create, control and organise the zone of negotiation between the work and its prospective reader.

The title on the cover of *MediaArtHistories* is set against a suave and visually suggestive background with hints of pixelated imagery and biological forms. The order of terms in the title signals that the book has two central concerns: media art and art history, with "art" standing, triumphantly, yet uneasily, in the centre. Moreover, it seems significant that the editor, Oliver Grau, did not employ the currently fashionable term "archaeology", but instead retained the more traditional label "history". This decision may be attributed to Grau's desire to refer to his own discipline, the established field of art history. However, the title is not as cautious as it may seem, for the use of the plural "histories" signifies that history (in good poststructuralist fashion) can never be singular and unified. Indeed, the editor's introduction proposes to elevate media art to an accepted position in the canon of art history: «The goal is to open up art history to include media art from recent decades and contemporary art forms» (p. 1).

Grau claims that his project is motivated in part by the institutional neglect of media art. I have to admit that my personal impression of the field is very different. Whether looking at the most influential international galleries and museums, attending blockbuster shows such as the Kassel Documenta or the Venice Biennale, considering the catalogues of the major publishing houses, leafing through current magazines or attending conferences – media art, at least to me, appears ubiquitous. There are even large-scale historiographic retrospectives held in established institutions. For example, three recent representatives come to mind from the small

sector of projected and filmic installations: *Beyond Cinema. The Art of Projection, 1963-2005* at the Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin (2006-07), *X-Screen. Filmische Installationen und Aktionen der 60er und 70er Jahre* at the Museum Moderner Kunst Vienna (2003-04) and *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* at the Whitney Museum New York (2001-02). *MediaArtHistories* seems to be in line with these attempts to historicise and validate a certain tradition formerly ignored for its ephemerality and limited to interstitial institutions. However, it may be the case that Grau's anthology merely approaches traditional art history polemically because the discipline is often considered the most conservative branch of the humanities.

Indeed, while reading the collection I got the strong impression that despite the outspoken institutional trajectory, most contributions did not strictly follow the path established by the introduction. A quick look at the authors suffices to explain the book's diverse intellectual milieu. There are proponents of new media (Lev Manovich), sound studies (Douglas Kahn), media archaeology (Erkki Huhtamo), film studies (Sean Cubitt), visual culture (W.J.T. Mitchell) and the intersection of scientific history with art (Barbara Stafford). The articles themselves contain a similar heterogeneity of approaches and topics. We find a discussion of contemporary Japanese video art (Machiko Kusahara) next to a genealogical examination of an early 13<sup>th</sup> Century Arabic treatise on mechanical devices that teases out some proto-cybernetic as well as religious connotations (Gunalan Nadarajan), a consideration of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century phantasmagoria (Oliver Grau) and a discussion of practical questions of curating, exhibiting and archiving media art (Christiane Paul).

Therefore, we are confronted with a janus-faced book: on the one hand, the introduction and several of the pieces present the anthology's clear and outspoken institutional project, and on the other, there exists a relatively wide-ranging cast of characters from which the read-

er may select those she finds the most rewarding. While concepts like virtual reality or convergence were hailed as central topics in the 1990s, today's key terms seem to be interactivity, immersion, and projection. In addition, although art is central to many of the contributions, there are also exceptions to this rule. A fascinating case study is Timothy Lenoir's account of constructing a collaborative history of science (the case study focuses on bioinformatics) where new media is used «for purposes of documentation and critical debate suitable to the creation of socially responsible scientific knowledge» (p. 357). What this text has to do with others that concentrate on media art in the narrower sense of the word, however, remains somewhat vague. It seems that the book is not quite sure whether it is addressing a reformed

art history, a newly emerging *Bildwissenschaft* (visual studies) or is instead aimed at a more heterogeneous crowd that takes an interest in the mediated nature of contemporary art, culture and science. Finally, a symptomatic reading of *MediaArtHistories* produces important questions: how will the university deal with the convergence of (mass) media, (life) science, (technological) history, cultural studies, politics and many other fields into a mediatised audiovisual culture? What expertise and knowledge (and therefore claim to influence) can be mustered by disciplines as diverse as media studies, art history, film and television studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and the history of science? Grau's anthology deserves credit for introducing concerns that might be at the centre of (institutional) debates for years to come.