

Symposium Graphic Design Museum 19/12/2009, Paradiso Amsterdam

## me you and everyone we know is a curator

Only seconds after design critic Rick Poynor accidentally referred to himself as a 'designosaur' rather than a 'dinosaur', a member of the public had already shared Poynor's slip of the tongue on Twitter as a new word; only to be corrected by the man sitting next to me. With dazzling speed he had googled the word and found it already coined by another design writer. An interesting addition to the symposium's subject: with the title suggesting *Me, you, and everyone we know is a curator* thanks to technological developments like YouTube and Twitter, one could, perhaps, add: *and a real-time critic*.

There was enough to Twitter about during the symposium in Paradiso in Amsterdam, on December 19. Initiated by the Graphic Design Museum and organized by its director, Mieke Gerritzen, together with designer Sophie Krier, *Me, you, and everyone we know is a curator* questioned the role of museums, foundations and magazines in the era of YouTube, social networks and blogs. According to the accompanying program-booklet, *"Designers, artists, mediators and policy makers need to redefine their position, because new technologies define to a large extent today's possibilities and means of presentation and archiving. There is a need for new quality criteria, frames of references, and alternative methods for enabling connections between the virtual and the physical space of today's culture."* In a line-up of international speakers **Sander van der Pavert**, maker of **LuckyTV**, showed some of his light-hearted remixes of images from the media as visual interventions in between the lectures. **Koert van Mensvoort**, founder of *next nature*, moderated the day's program.

American science-fiction author and design critic **Bruce Sterling** kicked off with an overwhelming and intriguing speech that left the public in such a state of excitement that moderator Koert van Mensvoort wondered whether a bomb had just exploded. In an attempt to forecast the coming decennium, when the first generation of 'digital natives' comes of age, Sterling suggests two modes of being: "Gothic High-Tech" and "Favela-Chic". As an illustration, Sterling compares Gothic High-Tech with E.A. Poe's *House of Usher*. The ruins of our high-tech past, like an old attic filled with an immense amount of abandoned websites that, unfit for restoration, will become the living dead of technology. The concept of Favela-Chic is more difficult to grab. In Sterling's words, *"There's no clear direction to go, but there's nothing to preserve."* Sterling sketches immense digital landscapes of lawless slums, where, as he explained in an earlier lecture in July at a technological convention called Reboot 11, *"you have lost everything material, everything you've built and everything you had, but you're still wired to the gills, and really big on Facebook."* Knowing what to do with these futuristic possibilities as a curator or museum is difficult, admitted Sterling, but *"the most important thing to understand about the 10's is that they'll only last ten years."* In 2019, the current mode of being could very well be 'Chic Favela-Gothic'.

Following the theoretical futurism of Sterling, **Julia Noordegraaf**, program director of the Master Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image at the University of Amsterdam,

seemed all the more embedded in practice. Working on a book called *The Performing Archive* (to be published in 2011), Noordegraaf focused on audiovisual archives online. To illustrate her main question; what is the consequence of reusing audiovisual material for the knowledge it originally represents, Noordegraaf presented the project *Celluloid Remix* as a case study. *Celluloid Remix* challenged people to make a remix of old audiovisual material provided by the Dutch Film Museum, on the theme *Modern Times*. In the process of remixing, the activity of curating and the activity of editing blurred into each other. Don't forget history, Noordegraaf argued, but make it valuable for the present: "*we can't do away with institutions*".

Curator **Sarah Cook**, research fellow at the University of Sunderland, presented her work under the title *curatorial strategies for online artistic production*. While presenting some of her recent curatorial work - ranging from the project *Hotel Vue des Alpes*, a fictional online hotel where you can book a room and be the only guest in a virtual mountain environment, to the exhibitions *Broadcast Yourself* and *My Own Private Reality*. Cook exposed a shift from 'curators' to 'filter feeders', agreeing with Geert Lovink's opinion in the symposium booklet that "*what we need is a growing awareness of the existence and architecture of the filters that surround us*".

Veteran of design writing **Rick Poynor**, founder of the English graphic design review *Eye* and author for a range of design magazines like *Blueprint* and *Domus*, presented an overview of the state of affairs in design criticism, mainly on the web. With a large amount of 'design blogs' as examples, Poynor questioned the quality of design writing on the web, looking for clear individual voices and critical points of view. He has a sceptical attitude towards many online design critics, but also showed a number of blogs that stand out in a positive way, noting that some of these blogs are actually being transformed into print and published as books.

Passionate about his work, Poynor pleaded that "*there's a flame of culture that we need to fan and keep alive*", and that it is important to enable high-quality online design criticism by providing a budget for authors, stating that "*the lack of a contributor budget is holding it all back*."

In a short intermezzo co-organiser **Sophie Krier** quickly gave an impression of the process of producing the symposium and her personal views on design, design writing and curatorship: an interesting reflection on the curating of a symposium on curating.

Joining this blur of organizing and participating in *Me, you, and everyone we know is a curator* was **Daniel van der Velden** of **Metahaven**, the graphic design studio that developed the visual identity of the symposium. Combining a column-like speech with images of all the logo's, *Buy Now!*-buttons and *Join!*-invitations one can find on the web, Van der velden reflected on how we are all becoming "*social animals - the social media brands representing the most uninhibited attempt to appeal to our inner reptile*", and how we are manipulated by web interfaces to join standards, ending with the cynical conclusion that "*you don't choose things. They choose you*."

Nicknamed 'The Antichrist of Silicon Valley', **Andrew Keen** was arguably the most provocative

speaker of the day. As the author of the bestseller *Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet is killing our culture*, Keen is regarded as one of the most outspoken critics of the Internet. In an exhilarating speech Keen broke away from all digital utopia's, explaining how professional curators or, in his vocabulary, gatekeepers, are being replaced by amateurs who are destroying not only the gates, but also the buildings. As curators, *"your monopoly was in taste"* preached Keen, stating that the authority of the gatekeepers is lost to the mob: *"the Google algorithm replaces libraries and librarians"*. The Internet, says Keen, has destroyed value, becoming (referring back to Bruce Sterling) a vast favela. But in the physical world culture can maintain its value, and museums should stick to their guns, embrace the physical, and resist digital seductions. *"We have to realise that the physical will always have value, will not go away"* - and should be preserved *"so that the next generation that has sense will have something to inherit"*.

Keen's lecture clearly whipped up the audience, and moderator Koert van Mensvoort noted that his speech was *"the second bomb that went off today"*. When asked for practical steps to take, Keen emphasized a working together of traditional gatekeepers and institutions, having curators, teachers, librarians, parents, museums, libraries, schools and universities reclaiming their authority and saying *'I know more than you.'*

**Willem Velthoven**, founder and director of **Mediamatic** and as such recently awarded with an important oeuvre-award by the Dutch Fund BKVB, shortly presented one of Mediamatic's latest project: the Mediamatic travelling guide and the accompanying Amsterdam Biennial. The basis for both the guide and the biennial is an Internet community spread around the globe, giving access to a number of cities worldwide on the level of the inhabitants rather than tourists. For the biennial, Mediamatic asked productive members of the community to arrange a space in the Mediamatic showroom, representing the city they come from. The participants of the show became the curators of their 'pavilions' - though a critical visitor of the symposium questioned if it weren't the Mediamatic interns making the selection of participants who were the real curators.

Visual artist **Aram Bartholl** wonders *"in which form does the network data space manifest itself in our everyday life"* and searches for an answer through his works, that are often 1:1 copies from the Internet- and gaming-imagery. Bartholl made a life-size Google-Maps pinpoint and placed it in the real world, recreated some of the environment from the video game *Counterstrike* on the sidewalk outside a gallery, and had people walking around the city with their name floating in neon-green letters above their heads, as in the game *World of Warcraft*.

Closing the series of lectures, **Dagan Cohen** of **Upload Cinema** gave a striking example of a combination of the power of the masses and the authority of the editor. Upload Cinema is a monthly screening in Amsterdam (and recently also in Rotterdam and The Hague) of short movies found on the web in the cosy cinema De Uitkijk for a members-only public. With a different theme each month, active members, spotters and the rest of the audience are invited to submit fitting movies. Every month, a longlist of around 200 movies is filtered down to 35 movies, first by the local editorial teams and again by the central editorial team and a guest-curator.

The program's closing debate was introduced and moderated by philosopher **Henk Oosterling**, senior lecturer at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The panel consisted of representatives of Dutch funds and institutes: **Jorinde Sejjdel**, editor-in-chief of art magazine *Open*; **Johan Oomen**, head of the Research & Development department of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision; **Bart Rutten**, curator at the fine arts department of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; and **Gitta Luiten**, chief of the Mondriaan Foundation. After raising the question whether or not to follow new technological developments and how to find practical uses for them, the debate covered questions like: is the historical relevance of art pieces something of the past; and is 'the museum' becoming part of a network rather than being an autonomous institute. Sadly the symposium ended rather abruptly and before the debate could go more in-depth: the concert hall where *Me, You, And Everyone we know is a Curator* took place had to be emptied for the concert scheduled for that evening. Hopefully, the debate will be continued at another time: especially the practical concerns in dealing with the theoretical input of the day stayed rather abstract, and it would be worth while to keep the discussion on this aspect going.

<sup>1</sup> Sterling's lecture at Reboot 11 can be found on [http://www.wired.com/beyond\\_the\\_beyond/2009/07/video-from-reboot-11/](http://www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/2009/07/video-from-reboot-11/)