Interview with **Peter Weibel, Chairman and CEO of the Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany. He was interviewed by Sarah Cook at ZKM, September 2000. (2001)**

This web page contains only Part One of the interview (concerning curatorial practice). Both parts of the interview (including institutional questions) are available as a 5000-word pdf file.

Part One: Sarah Cook began by describing the idea behind CRUMB and asking how Peter Weibel approached new media curating, both in regards to the exhibition *net_condition* and more generally. He began by outlining what he sees as the four basic principles of curating media art on the net.

Peter Weibel: The first task of a curator working on the web is to find out the criteria of what work is only adequate for the net and to develop criteria for works that are non-local. Most of the artworks in history are locally bound, which means the spectator and the artwork itself share the same space. Even with media works this is important - in a media installation you share the same space. For the first time with the net, the spectator and the work are dislocated, separate; they don't share the same space. It is important to look for works and the criteria that are appropriate to this condition.
The next thing is the classical function of a curator: selection. Anybody could go to any artist and say, "I want to see your work." Hypothetically they have the possibility to travel to Germany and

Italy and England and have a list of artists and have addresses and phone numbers. But there are social obstacles - namely, artists will not open their doors to just anybody because the artist is also an entrepreneur - he needs money, he needs managing - so he will only open his doors to people he thinks are useful to him. People have this romantic belief of how art functions, but truthfully, a normal spectator doesn't count for anything in the art system. This is the undemocratic truth. If a famous curator from a famous place calls an artist, he would say, 'please come ...'. So the job of a curator is to select artists and to bring this work together so that the public can see it.

And this is the same for the net. People do not have the time to go through the hundreds of thousands of works on the net, so we have to create sites that are curated. People then know that if they want to save time that curators will always provide orientation and navigation to the works. So you have to trust, when you visit a curated site, that you will see a hundred excellent works dealing with the conditions of the net. This is the classical function of a curator and it is also necessary on the net as it is necessary in the museum. People say, 'why should I need a curator on the net?' And I say 'for the same reasons that you need a curator for the paintings. The paintings are available, but you don't have the chance to see them.' They say, 'I can look at home at net art' and I say, 'You would not know where to go because you don't have the address. There are hundreds of thousands of artists on the net but you would never find them, it would take you years.' But if somebody has the time to concentrate and to select then you can just click and then you can see it. And this is the second function of media curator.

The next is for me the most interesting function of a curator and that is to understand the technology as a tool. That means a curator can know even more than the artist can. He can study theory and then can commission a work. This would be the next step - the curator as producer, or impresario, as in the field of cinema. A cinema producer says 'I have an idea but I need a scriptwriter, I need a director, I need an actor.' So a curator can say, 'according to my knowledge, according to my expertise, I think we have to develop something new.' And then he can look around and see whom the people are who do this. A curator then is not someone who takes care of an existing work but a producer commissioning a new work. This is the most interesting aspect of curatorial work.

It means, for example, when we have installation systems, when we have artificial intelligence, then as curators, we have to think of what these new entities consist of and what they can they do for the net. So the curator's job is not only to make an exhibition of existing

work or traditional work, as in a museum. A curator also has to remember that a virtual museum can consist of additional work, being rendered two-dimensionally or digitally; it can be media work. So the most important other thing is to develop new things that another museum cannot do, what I call new formats. A curator can ask 'how can I combine photography, video, computer, and the Internet? What could be a new format, a new way of story telling, or a new lifestyle, new activities?' And then you have to find the people - poets, singers, songwriters - not to make a song for a record, not to make a poem for a book, but to think about what can be done for the net, and then develop something specifically for it.
These are the four basic principles.

Sarah Cook: Following the principle of selection, how did you research the works in *net_condition*? Do you work from recommendations, do you talk to artists and find out what they're looking at?

PW: Yes, everything that you've just said.

SC: What about how the web has changed your working practice? Do you go to the festivals - which do you find useful? Do you do studio visits online? Do you first communicate with artists by email, do you do traditional studio visits? Where do you look for new work? Do you subscribe to any of the listservs?

PW: Theoretically I would subscribe, but purely practically, being burdened by so much work as head of the institution, I don't have the time to participate. But this is truly just a practical reason. About the festivals, I have to tell you the terrible truth that I have never been to them. I was only at Ars Electronica as long as I was the director. But I have never been to Siggraph, nor Doors of Perception, or any of these festivals. And I don't think it is necessary. Which is why I don't organise a festival here. When I started at ZKM they had the 'Multimediale,' and I stopped it, because this festival had a historical role that is now over. The role of Multimediale was (in the 80s, and beginning of 90s), to promote media art, to make it more widely accepted. For example, in 1972 nobody knew about Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola, about Woody and Steina Vasulka, about Nam June Paik. But today, when Nam June Paik attracts a mass audience and is as popular as Mickey Mouse, then it is because of the festivals promoting media

art. Media art festivals have now become a routine element. It is no longer a forum where you have new subjects, new issues, new ideas, and new names. So this pivotal agency or role that festivals had - to play the motor of acceleration, of investigation, motivation of innovation - is over now.

The first period of my research is just telematic - by writing, phoning, and mailing around - and only when I think I have to speak to the person in person, to be at the place (which is usually the case to support my judgement) do I go there. But what is useful is actually to go to some places to discover new artists that are not part of this electronic community. Many artists are a little bit difficult, or shy, or have bad connections, or hate each other, so they will say 'I'm the only one here in this whole city, there's nothing here,' and you cannot trust them. You have to go there and find out there still are other existing artists, to see there are others beside this one you have already approached. So in the end local research is also necessary to get, as much as possible, an objective image.

But first of all - this is my approach and maybe it is not an approach many people share - you need a theory. A theory is a tool to discover something. You can go to the jungle without a map, but it will take you a long time to discover what a jungle is. But a map is a theory so you know what you are looking for. Naturally during the trip your perceptions change, because a map is not an exact representation, but is a start. With a theory (a tool, a map, an idea) you can make your journey and during the journey the theory changes and you say 'ah, I made a mistake, I have to reconstruct my tool.' But this takes a lot of time and what is very important is to know what you don't see.

When you go to a studio, or when you look at a paper you need what is called 'selective perception.' Without a theory in mind you might look through a magazine and not even realize what you are looking at. If you don't have this selective criteria in mind, then you won't find the interesting works. This is the starting point. Then you ask artists, then you read magazines, then you ask for recommendations from artists, from curators, and you follow every little piece of paper you find. But first you have to have a theoretical framework.

SC: What you've just described can be said to be true of traditional curatorial practice also. I'm interested to know how you think the field of curating has changed as a result of new media art.

PW: I would say the challenge of media curating is much greater than that faced by a normal curator, because there are so many books about painting and sculpture that it is difficult to make an error. But when you have a field like new media there is not much information in the field. There is a theoretical framework of painting and sculpture that has been elaborated over 100 years. As a curator then you have a very solid fundament for your judgement. And what is even more important is that you have a very strict, consolidated social structure, from galleries and museums. Curators just have to say 'what kind of artist do I want to show?' and then see that this artist has shown in this famous gallery, in this famous collection in this famous museum, and has these famous curators as supporters; you just proceed like this. Curators are always doing the same thing - waiting and waiting to see who else will buy a particular artist. In fact, if you go to European museums you see nearly all the same artists everywhere. It is true that people chose to rely on the judgement of other people, and on an accumulation of judgement following the curatorial mainstream. In media work, at the moment, we don't have this consolidated social structure.

SC: Do you think there will there be one?

PW: I don't hope so. Because if there will be one, we would have the same thing, just a repetition of the mainstream. So in media work, from avant-garde to advanced computer work, the challenge is greater for the curator because he has to be very bold and he must know a lot. He must know, above all, theory. I assure you it is absolutely for sure that many curators who curate shows about painters haven't read a book about painting in the last ten years. Because they don't need to. They say, 'I can trust my eye.' What that in fact means is that they are trusting the judgement of others. Their eyes are trained to see what they know. And when they have seen the works everywhere on the markets then they can show it. In the media world this is not possible. In the media

world to discover something, to make a good show, you have to have a lot of theory in your mind about the work and about the general discussion otherwise you would not see the work, you would not find it.

SC: One concern I have as a result of this perspective is that curators are presenting new media art accompanied by a lot of theory, as if to disguise the fact that it still has a lot more development to go through before it is seen as art.

PW: But I see that as an advantage. Your description is correct. Media art is very much theory dependent. But now comes my argument. What else, or what in the modern world is *not* theory dependent?

SC: Entertainment.

PW: Entertainment, exactly. And art is not entertainment. This is my point.

SC: Well, what about the exhibition at the Walker Art Center called Art Entertainment Network? *AEN* was an exhibition of web art about entertainment as part of the traveling exhibition *Let's Entertain* (seen at the Pompidou in December 2000 under the title *Au Dela du Spectacle*). I think those boundaries can be pushed ...

PW: Yes, those boundaries can be pushed. But it depends actually what the audience thinks. If an artist thinks it's entertainment that doesn't mean that an audience thinks it is entertainment. Naturally there are attempts to respond in that direction, but I'm skeptical. I'm skeptical, because my point is - and this is now a deeper argument - that the modern world is in fact dependent on theory. Airplanes and cars, all that we can see, is not built from perception, but from scientific concepts.

If we agree that the construction of the modern world is theory dependent, then we will agree that even if people believe in the world, they don't understand it. They use a

computer and they don't know how it is constructed, they just know how to use it. People know how to push a button for a coffee but they don't know how the coffee machine works. You can be happy about it and say 'this is the point of entertainment, objects and machines should entertain me.' But if you believe that man should master, or should try to be a master of his fate, that he should have the knowledge and competence to know what he is doing, then you have to accept that he should learn theory to understand the world.

You could then say that art should not be theory dependent, but then the consequence is that art is not a part of the modern world. Modern painting *is* theory dependent. Art is theory dependent because it wants to be part of the modern world. The opposite would be to exclude art from the modern world and say this is something we just enjoy sensually, we just have fun with, are entertained by. And it is understandable that artists don't want to be marginalised, and they want to become part of the fun. But then you see art is also defeated, because science, which is not fun, can not become marginalised because science is important. People are dependent on the images that are provided by science (on x-rays, on ultrasounds). They are no longer dependent on the images provided by art. Therefore art becomes marginalised because its images lack in necessity. And therefore in order not to be marginalised artists have decided to be part of the entertainment industry. But this is exactly the way they will be further marginalised because the professional entertainment industry knows better than art how to make fun entertainment.

SC: When you are curating, and in the case of *net_condition,* are you trying to remove new media art from that context, of entertainment or commercialism? Are you trying to give them a necessity?

PW: I give the works exactly what I am talking about: away from entertainment, I give art a strong theoretical, political and social urgency. And I make difficult shows.