Art from the Transmission Space

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In 1997 Andrea Sodomka and Martin Breindl were invited to contribute to the Graz exhibition project "2000-3. Artspace plus Interface." In response to this invitation, Sodomka and Breindl, together with Norbert Math and August Black, established alien productions. Their contribution to the exhibition entitled *Embedded Systems* was the starting point for what the quartet describes as "a network for working on the theory and practice of new technologies and media. Since 1985 all four artists have transcended boundaries with their technological art—as a group or as individuals, and often in collaboration with other artists. Their work includes intermedia performances and installations, electronic music, web art, radio art, sound art, interactive art, video, the visual arts and artistic photography."[1] The exhibition "2000-3" occupied different spaces (exhibition rooms, sidewalk café as studio, public space, department store), which together were conceived as a network, within which the installation *Embedded Systems* was one of the most precise and most extensive pieces. *Embedded Systems* also paradigmatically introduced an artistic method and defined something like the center of the group's œuvre, which has expanded into many different directions.[2]

For *Embedded Systems*, a complex network was created by connecting object-shaped technology-dominated quotidian realities to interactive web space and the capacity of programming languages, linked by diverse future effects. On an additional level, while the installation was accessible to visitors for direct spatial experience, from the perspective of the control elements, the work also shifted to another site: the command center, which was usable by the public only via internet, was located in another, closed, space. This interlocking spatial system, determined by various vectors, focused on the intelligence of banal everyday objects, especially those used for housekeeping tasks. Initially designed for a publicly accessible apartment, the installation was ultimately realized in the downtown department store Kastner + Öhler. A complete apartment's worth of consumer devices, such as a sewing machine, a kitchen counter with the typical appliances, and various light and sound devices were reprogrammed via their embedded chips. For the team, the point of departure was the fact that much of the chips' intelligence potential is not fully utilized when they perform the functions for which they were designed. The programming language Java promised a solution. alien productions implemented two different setups: on the one hand, the programming of the devices was extended; they were freed from their standardized usage, assigned new and unexpected functions, and linked with each other on their (electronic) intelligence level. On the other hand, the symphonically developed control system was transferred to the internet, where interventions into the determined script were possible by any user. Thus, audience experience of the installation was split into two spatial areas: the exhibition room's space, a physically accessible but not interactive area; and the space of the internet, a virtual, non-physical yet interactively changeable area. *Embedded Systems* turned out to be a real-fiction within a staged network situation, in which several different individual intelligences communicatively interacted. In this space, the internet user was not a superior, but an equal intelligence; the changes any user could cause amounted to roughly the same as what the washing machine or the TV set could change. The internet user truly became part of this reality, in contrast to the visitor of the physical installation, who was only exposed to this reality. Though physically present, the visitor was the only one who remained outside of any possibilities of communication, and consequently beyond that reality.

1 http://alien.mur.at, artists' biographies (accessed December 2011)
2 Several aspects follow another text by the author: "Ready Mades im Einsatz. alien productions in ihrer Transmitter-Rolle [Ready-Mades in Action. alien productions in their role as transmitters.],", *Artluk*, issue 4 (6) 2007, Warszawa, PL, 2007, 58–61.

To not have access to the network of information and data effectively means to be excluded from reality; it is possible to observe occurrences, but not to influence them. In a world where medialization takes place with ever-growing scope and complexity, access to information structures and communication is the decisive factor of spatial experience and participation in the formatting of contemporary spaces. alien productions have staged such formattings with a sensual and spectacular playfulness. The artists' messages are about systems that, in their applied mode, (may) show their ordinary face. alien productions found a creative trigger within the practicalities of real life: the user-friendly inventions which are touted in mail order catalogs as tools for simplifying everyday life and which are essentially based upon the smart inventive exploitation of enormous electronic and digital potential. With this potential as the starting point, the participatory level of the user was reflected and logged into a system-to-system relationship. In the chosen transmission mode, systemic awareness became apparent. On site access to the functionality of objects was denied to visitors, and in this, the team did not play the role of the sorcerer's apprentice[3] who has pressed every conceivable button of the control system and now presents the mess he has made, nor did they slip into the shape of a science fiction author who formulates the imminent threat of the uncontrollable superiority of the micro-wave or the vacuum cleaner over the human race. The articles of everyday use which seemed to take on a life of their own, which misbehaved and dropped out of their roles, turned out to be a spectacle in the form of a parable. The shift from one space to the other, and the question of where and how the control hub is configured, developed into a human-machine interface—not in the sense of such trivial horror scenarios as the term Human Interface denotes, but on the level of a parity of intelligences and a shifting of experiences. In the various spaces, it was possible to, on the one hand, influence the control systems and on the other hand to view their results. Nowadays—as demonstrated in *Embedded Systems*—access to the core is usually only possible by orientation within the *Zentrale*.[4] Actions there can be experienced visually and aurally, and yet, in spite of the sensory component on site, they signify the loss of perception of actual reality—which has shifted, in the form of decision-making processes, into electronic and telematic space.

On the one hand, this implies that the aura of the gallery presentation site is invoked, while on the other hand, compelling considerations suggest replacing the art-art-system with a reality-art-system.[5] This conception, as exemplified by alien productions, leads to those theses by Niklas Luhmann which have system relations at their heart. For Luhmann, the attributes of information are ascribed only to system-to-system-relationships (for example, society and art): "When dealing with system/environment relations, the system constitutes the internal side of the form, whereas the environment is its unmarked space. 'The environment' is nothing but an empty correlate of the system's self-reference; it provides no information. If, however, we are dealing with system/system relations, then the other side can be marked and indicated."[6] If, in *Embedded Systems*, we spoke of consequently marked system relations, then the question arises: to which extent does the extension of space, or better still, the transition from one space into the other and vice versa, play a role before, afterwards, and today? One discussion, which rightly flares up repeatedly, is concerned with the hermetic nature of the white cube in all its possible manifestations and the value system inherent in such presentation spaces, and it demands the definition of alternate sites and the declaration for the former or the latter. More often than one would think, different territories, when chosen, are classified as being located on the margins of art and are assigned to a non-artistic discourse.

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3   Translator's note: The German original calls to mind Goethe's *Zauberlehrling*.
4   Translator's note: The German word *Zentrale* means "headquarters", "main office" or "switchboard", but also denotes the "center".
5   Editor's note: Or, in other terms, replacing a self-referential gallery practice with an art anchored in practical or site-specific experience.
6   Niklas Luhmann, "The Function of Art and the Differentiation of the Art System," *Art as a social system*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2000, 133 pp.

In 1994, Sodomka/Breindl/Math had chosen both the studio and the courtyard of the Neue Galerie Graz in order to work operationally rather than representationally, with the intention of exploration and experiment. Their telematic live-radio-internet event entitled *State of Transition* was realized in collaboration with X-SPACE GRAZ, Neue Galerie Graz, V2-Organisatie Rotterdam, ORF-Kunstradio and ORF-Studio Steiermark. Lighting, text, and sound, as well as parallel circuits of exchange between Graz, Rotterdam and Vienna, shifted, at least for the time span of one long evening, the character of the laboratory into the limelight.[7] Their communication network integrated the area of the Europort Rotterdam, as well as the transit lounge of Vienna airport and the Austrian-Slovenian border point Spielfeld, and bring Michel Foucault's heterotopias to mind. Heterotopias present a fascinating backdrop where artistic approaches to various spatial dimensions (could) take place. "Utopias are sites with no real place. […] In any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. […] There are also […] effective places, in which the arrangements of society are inscribed, so to speak counter-placements or abutments, truly realized utopias, in which the real places within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted, places that are, in a sense, outside of all places, even if they may be located in reality. Because these places are so *different* from all the places that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, to distinguish them from utopias, *heterotopias*."[8] Since alien productions locate artistic concepts and realizations in diverse contexts and sites, it would seem that they are in conflict with Foucault's thesis. In fact, these "effective places, in which the arrangements of society are inscribed" are a common concern. Furthermore the "places outside of all places" can meanwhile be structurally determined within the WorldWideWeb.

Embedded Systems, which has been realized as collective performances and installations from Poznań (PL) to Durham, Ontario (CDN), is an excellent example for this method's profile. Here, the extension and interconnection of spaces, and transfers between them, play a decisive role. In addition to the sonic transformations of the kitchen equipment and the derived compositions, cooking performances were also on the program. An important element of the work was that the inhabitants of each host city were asked to provide photos of their kitchens, which were then turned into a backdrop when projected during the performances. Along with this connection between public and private, and the breaking down of boundaries between city space and living space, the complex technical arrangement of interconnected home appliances (which is science's state of the art), enables a shift from a physical body/system to a social body. *Embedded Systems* creates a structure that includes a community, where the one-way channel of observation expands as the observers (of the event) provide material for observation (pictures of their private kitchens). Again, a window opens towards Niklas Luhmann, who persuasively describes first, second and third order observations.[9] From this practice and its underlying concept, significant conclusions beyond the immediate cause can be drawn. In all of their works, alien productions employ the technical proportions and complexity which correlate with everyday, conceivable and tangible human dimensions. This is also true for *Alien City*, a virtual city which is assembled from elements of many cities of this world. Here past and present, reality and fiction, and image and sound are combined into a hybrid form. This assemblage represents not so much the creators' manifold technical talents, but rather a contemporary state of reality: only with an enhanced sensitivity to images and sounds and their localization, only by assigning and linking all the individual parts to each other, can a world view that is segmented into several hundred components be reasonably fashioned into a whole. From this world view, which is based on keen observation and rooted

7   See also Werner Fenz, "Paradoxien der Raumerfahrung," *State of Transition*, exhibition catalog, Neue Galerie Graz, 1994.

8   Michel Foucault, "Andere Räume," *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik,* ed. Karlheinz Barck et.al., Leipzig 1992, p. 34–46.

9   Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main 1998, Vol. 2, 1122 pp.

in scientific knowledge, networks emerge. In many examples alien productions bridge the gap between their individual disciplines, which they actively pursue, and the persistent desire to transfer them into a reception space that remains as open as possible. ORF Kunstradio[10] is a radio platform which operates as public space, and provides the artists, particularly alien productions, with opportunities to further shape, transform and reshape the complex projects with an aural emphasis.

alien productions expand their spheres of activity into the public or semipublic areas by adding a historical dimension to the platform of the present, using industrial facilities that were closed down, in most cases for reasons of profit, despite high technical standards. Frequently, complicated mechanical engines and devices and the sounds and noises they create inspire the artists to delve into the past. After their 2003 investigation of a closed carpet factory in Krems-Stein, the group returned to Lower Austria in 2007 to explore the technical and the social surroundings of a roll engraving manufacturing plant in Guntramsdorf, which has been closed since 1986 and is now a museum. The old mechanism was once again set in motion for artistic purposes, playing *work songs* that have long since faded away, which were electronically processed. Not only was the considerable technological equipment cross-linked, but the reports of former factory workers added to a kaleidoscope of Austrian industrial history. This retrospective triggered what was once the latest technology, but which now belongs to a museum; where it persists as a more or less silent witness, yet remains victorious over the destroyed careers of the former employees.

In the fall of 2007, alien productions once again employed historical content as the inspiration for a multi-part installation in the Künstlerhaus Graz.[11] In this case, the points of departure were utopias, visions and inventions that have led, for example, to the pieces *Die Bühne ist leer* (The Stage is Vacant), 1996 (Frederick Kiesler's kinetic visions for the theatre), *Die Differenzmaschine* (The Difference Engine), 1996 (Charles Babbage's calculating machine) or *Arbeitsmuster* (Work Patterns), 2003 (Joseph Marie Jacquard's weaving loom that was controlled via punched cards). Among the human instruments of perception, the eye is undisputedly one of the most significant ones. Apart from all physiological arguments, this is confirmed especially by market research and by the dramatic surge of an industry where machines that generate images are employed to dominate the viewers' field of vision to a considerable degree. Time and again, vision has been given primary attention, including consideration of the act of processing what is seen. In their installation *Der Gedankenprojektor* (The Thought Projector), the artists reverse the traditional order of things. The eye perceives images as clippings of reality, and constantly aims to capture them as motifs via an intermediary device, be it analog or digital: here the eye itself is turned into a motif. A professional-grade fundus camera (used for ophthalmological applications) scans the interior surface of the eye and the iris. Thus, the natural instrument of observation itself is turned into the object of observation. At the same time, the eye's potential capability for memory and as projection space for different kinds of data occupies the center of artistic exploration and production. alien productions often reflect newly discovered or researched points of reference in the conception and design of their projects. They are interested in inquiry and examination, which usually lead to complex depictions that address phenomena within a broad range of historical and contemporary, scientific and social facts. Frequently, the artists focus on technical utopias and visions whose significance to the here and now (could) be decisive. *Der Gedankenprojektor* was also triggered by such an initial spark: shortly before 1900, Nikola Tesla (1856–1943), a Croatian-born scientist educated at technical universities in Graz, Prague and Budapest, considered

10 ORF Kunstradio–Radiokunst was founded in 1987 by Heidi Grundmann as an important platform and still remains an essential forum for numerous artists. That the project has served as a positive model, far beyond Europe, deserves mentioning.

11 The exhibition was presented precisely localized from September 14 to October 28, 2007 and was later shown in adapted versions in Linz (*ARS* Electronica, Landesgalerie), Vienna (Künstlerhaus) and Tokyo (NTT InterCommunication Center [ICC] Gallery A).

a forgotten genius of electrical science, intended to build a device for photographing thoughts. This opportunity to elaborately develop an image transfer sparked alien productions' interest for several reasons, beginning with historical incidents or phenomena. The eyes of the deceased, for example, were said to store the image of the last thing they have seen, which, in case of violent death, would capture the identity of the murderer; or the occult aura-photographers who were said to be able to transmit their thoughts onto photosensitive paper by sheer force of concentration without the help of a camera.[12] These ideas, now transported to the present time, behave as an immanent system of art, in which new subjects emerge by way of the camera *augmented* on the basis of Tesla's visions. The concept is linked to a pragmatic view of the transparent citizen; of the surveillance cameras, whose eyes are aimed at us no longer just from private territories but also in any interchangeable urban space; of tracking telephone calls, which reveals the hierarchical systems behind and in front of the closed doors of the corridors of power, the guardians of law and order, and the designated or self-appointed control organs. If it is possible to capture thoughts as photographs, are they still free? Is it even possible to produce representations of them, or, even more terrifying, to interpret them? If such were possible, then surveillance policing would have realized its ultimate objective. To paradigmatically draw this topic into a serious intellectual game, the images that emerge within the project *Gedankenprojektor* are not only projected in different manifestations within the exhibition space, but also streamed onto the internet. Thus, they are (always anonymously) accessible not only for the internal visitors, but also for the external users—the white cube obeys a transparency of content. Comments on the thought images and their interpretations return to the art space via internet, where they are projected. Thus, even in a contained art space, which frequently remains autonomous regarding content—a situation which is endlessly debated pro and contra—even here a human being may be *looked into* by a much larger audience than those present on site. When one is familiar with alien productions' artistic practices, it almost goes without saying that the project's soundscape is controlled by the space, or respectively by the actants present within the space. All elements should be interconnected wherever possible, because the art created by the group aims beyond purely formal or design aspects. And yet, form plays a central role: many historical and many current phenomena appear *in the form of*, and thus neither as a symbol nor as an indexical sign. Whether we are presented with interconnected circuits or with the specific application of a programming language, with technical devices or with unrealized inventions that manifest as future projections, while following alien productions' development, we are increasingly confronted with *ready-mades in action*: kitchen devices, inoperative machines, or scientific apparatus enter the scene in the form of transmitters densely woven into the nets of information society. From these exact observations and interpretations, alien productions' transmission space is constituted.

12 Several of these interesting occurrences are presented on the alien productions website under the subject *Der Gedankenprojektor*: http://alien.mur.at/ (accessed December 2011)