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FROM FIRST FESTIVALS TO INSTITUTION. WRO SOUND BASIS VISUAL ART FESTIVAL AND THE POLISH DIGITAL TURN¹

Abstract: This article deals with the institutional aspect of new media art, which is inextricably linked to the socio-cultural and political context of its development. In the article, the author focuses on the history of the WRO Art and Media Centre, the most important and only independent institution in Poland, which has been co-creating an alternative system of festivals and new media art centres since 1989. By analyzing the early period of WRO's activity, one can see the process of gradual institutionalization of the independent initiative initiated at a critical moment, i.e. during Poland's systemic transformation, by a group of young people from Wrocław's punk counterculture community, who saw the new media as a tool of resistance and struggle against the repressive system of communist rule.

Keywords: new media art, institutional definition of art, art world, institutional criticism, cultural policy, WRO Sound Basis Visual Art, media art festivals, video art festivals

Introduction

What do the institutions dedicated to media art say about it? What story do they tell, what do they pass over in silence, what do they remember and what do they forget? The cultural history of media art institutions demands a voice and its rightful place on the pages of contemporary art history. Their functioning challenges the hegemonic nature of the artistic mainstream, constructing an alternative narrative that reverberates the language of exclusion and marginalization of the contemporary art world. In

¹ This publication was prepared within the framework of the scientific project "From first festivals to institution. WRO Art Center and the Polish digital turn" carried out with funding from competition #140 ID UB Adam Mickiewicz University.

this paper, I focus on the institutional aspect of new media art, an aspect that remains inextricably linked to the socio-cultural and political context of its development. For the purposes of my inquiry, I define new media art as an instance of artistic practice which is produced, presented and preserved in a distinct institutional field which, subsequently, directly influences the reception and distribution processes. In this approach, I draw on the concept of “art worlds” introduced by American sociologist Howard S. Becker,² who argued that a work of art, regardless of the form it takes, is not the product of an individual but of a social system in which the artist is one of the actors. I share the belief of Sarah Thornton, who argues that “the world of contemporary art is a loose network of overlapping subcultures united by a belief in art.”³ Art practices that combine art and science are one such subculture. The institution is construed here in a particular fashion, drawing on the thought of Antonio Gramsci and Pierre Bourdieu,⁴ whereby it constitutes not only an external, organizational framework for the actions of actors in a specific social field characterized by a defined structure, established power relations, hierarchies or stable procedures of conduct. Institutionalization also manifests in the systemic-structural circumstances, normative acts, procedures and defined roles of the social actors – resulting from their positions and functions – as well as in the organizational cultures, cultural policies, geographies and chronologies of the networks thus created, in production processes and circulations of knowledge, being also evinced in the material surroundings or embodied attitudes, and so on and so forth. It comes to the surface in the dominant discourses and in the underlying ideologies that inform individual actions. The perspective adopted here enables a broader look at new media art, i.e. not only as an artistic but also a socio-cultural phenomenon deriving from historical and geographical factors, which has had a direct impact on the practices of everyday life, as a vital contributor to the shape of the global “network society”⁵ of the 21st century. My paper will concentrate my attention on the case of the WRO Art Center,⁶ the most important and the only institution in Poland, which since 1989 has been co-creating an alternative system of festivals and new media art centers, remaining still not much disseminated in the pages of the great history. I am mainly interested in its early period, to show the gradual institutionalization of an independent initiative launched at a critical time, i.e. during the political transformation in Poland, by a group of young people from the punk counter-culture milieu of Wrocław, who saw the new media as a tool of resist-

² H.S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1982, p. 10.

³ S. Thornton, *Siedem dni w świecie sztuki*, trans. M. Kuliś, Propaganda, Warszawa 2011, p. 9.

⁴ P. Bourdieu, L.J.D. Wacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej*, trans. A. Sawisz, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2001.

⁵ M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA 2004.

⁶ The WRO Art Center is an independent institution and non-profit organization that was opened in 2008 by the WRO Media Art Center Foundation, established in 1998. Since 1989, it organized the annual WRO Sound Basis Visual Art Festival, renamed the WRO Media Art Biennial in 1995, which has been held every two years since 1993.

ance and struggle against the repressive system of communist rule. To achieve this goal, I intend to analyze the history of the Sound Basis Visual Art Festival, focusing primarily on the first, founding event in 1989, which gave birth to WRO. This pioneering endeavour initiated by Piotr Krajewski, Violetta Kutlubasis Krajewski and Zbigniew Kupisz (founders of the WRO Art Center) was a unique opportunity to present media art in Central and Eastern Europe at a time of political breakthrough. In the approach proposed in this article, I am more interested in micro-histories often not easy, complex, full of rifts, gaps embedded in the experiences of people, the memory of places, contained in objects, the local landscape, visible in what is not-only human. In these great stories I look for cracks, fissures recognizing the importance of local narratives that build a heterogeneous picture of the institutional world of new media art. Learning about them gives a better insight into the complexity of the issues raised while revising historically entrenched beliefs.

Grand Narratives of Art Science and Technology towards Little Narratives

The genealogies of new media art have already been explored in a number of significant studies, which make up a grand narrative on the relationship between science, art and technology.⁷ They yield a coherent story that seeks to reflect the turbulent, dynamic history of the alliance between art and science, marked by the experience of two world wars or the Cold War arms race. With the intensive development of technology-based art practice, an institutional environment is taking shape, networks of people, places, spaces that are friendly to new media art, requiring completely new forms of engagement and unconventional partnerships do not find understanding in mainstream art institutions.

The case of new media art is part of a broader historical context touching on the problem of the increasing incompatibility of museum institutions with changing art practice over time. This history can be traced back to the avant-garde practices of the early 20th century for which there was no place in the public museum venues that still espoused Enlightenment ideologies and modernist ideals of aesthetic beauty.⁸ It is in the tradition of the Bauhaus, Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism or Expressionism that the historical alliance of art, science and technology takes its origin. Formulated between the First and the Second World War, the utopian visions of alternative institutional projects created by artists conceived by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky,

⁷ E.A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media*, Phaidon Press, London–New York 2009; Ch. Paul, *Digital Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2015; O. Grau (ed.), *MediaArtHistories*, The MIT Press, Cambridge–London 2007; R.W. Kluszczyński, *Sztuka interaktywna. Od dzieła instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010.

⁸ More about the transformation of museum practices: S. Szykowna, *W stronę postludzkiego muzeum. Praktyki artystyczne w dobie postpandemii*, “Kultura Współczesna” 2022, Vol. 4, No. 120, pp. 80–93.

Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, the artists gathered around the Société Anonyme or the a.r. group are examples of actions targeting the existing status quo, paving the way for new, subversive ideas that went against the prevailing standards. The Museums of Art Culture, Kabinett Der Abstrakten, Museum of Modern Art 1920, Museum of Art in Łódź or the International Collection of Modern Art are projects that ushered in further attempts to overcome the dominance of the single valid model of the museum, construed as a temple of art. Although – save for a few exceptions – “they were generally creations that never managed to evolve beyond provisionality”⁹, their contribution to dismantling institutional practices cannot be overestimated. Initiated by the avant-garde, the critique of the museum spanned successive movements and artistic manifestations opposing the institution of art seen as anachronistic, ideologically and politically entangled. Numerous historians cite the 1960s as a crucial decade in this respect, pervaded by a spirit of artistic dissent and political resistance against museum institutions, expressed most robustly in the new neo-avant-garde tendencies. That atmosphere of rebellion sparked the first wave of institutional critique, initiated by artists such as Marcel Broodthaers and Daniel Buren in Europe or Michael Asher and Hans Haacke in the United States. Using various means, those artists undertook a critical analysis of the structures and logic of the museum.¹⁰ The critical discourse was not only directed against artistic practice but, primarily, the institutional mechanisms and the space where they materialized. The indisputable achievement of those first-wave forays is the opening, disruption and desacralization of the museum space, as a result of which artistic practice transcended its hallowed, elitist walls. That spirit of neo-avant-garde dissent, fuelled by cybernetic optimism, gave rise to alternative programmes, cultural institutions, such as EAT Experiments in Art and Technology, artist residencies at the Bell Lab, informal meeting spaces of the Gaberbocchus Common Room in London – created by Stefan and Franciszka Themerson (1957–1959), the experimental Groundcourse run by Roy Scott at the Ealing Art College in London (1961–1964), as well as pioneering exhibitions *Generative Computergrafik* (Studien Galerie, Stuttgart 1965), *Computer-generated pictures* (Howard Wise Gallery, New York, 1965), *Computergrafik* (Galerie Wendelin Niedlich, Stuttgart 1965; *Cybernetic Serendipity* at Institute of Contemporary Art, London 1968), *Software* (Jewish Museum, New York 1970), *Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* (Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal 1963) dedicated to art, science and technology, which demarcated a new field of artistic endeavour based on the previously impossible scientific and technological alliances. This very brief overview of the most important initiatives indicates not only the scale of the phenomenon itself but also the range of artistic pursuits that largely dominated the artistic practices of the neo-avant-garde of the time. Christiane Paul argues that “new media art has inspired many dreams of our technological future,

⁹ A. Pindera, J. Suchan (eds.), *Awangardowe muzeum*, trans. M. Buchalik, J. Figiel, K. Pijarski, M. Ujma, M. Wawrzyńczak, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2020, p. 23.

¹⁰ A. Alberro, B. Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA–London 2011.

among them the dream of a more or less radical reconfiguration of museums and art institutions.” And while it would be wrong, in her view, “to assume that new media art intentionally engages in Institutional Critique as a field of artistic practice”, she argues that Digital Art “intersects with Institutional Critique in that it poses important questions regarding the status and role of the art object, as well as institutional processes.”¹¹

The process of gradual institutional autonomization of new media art, which has been progressing since the 1970s, has resulted in the separation of technology-based art practice from the contemporary art world, which still has far-reaching consequences today, translating into the still low visibility of this type of artistic practice in the broader field of contemporary art. This fact has become the subject of the critical discourse developed since the 1990s around new media art, which is most fully expressed in the problematization of the very concept of new media art understood as a “historical”¹² category, “transitional”¹³ or “self-referential”,¹⁴ being the direct cause of the aforementioned marginalization.¹⁵ Without resolving the outcome of the ongoing dispute over the definition itself, it is worth looking at the ongoing discussions and critical voices as a manifestation of concern for the heritage of new media art, which in the context of current technological revaluations requires far-reaching rethinking. For the purposes of this text, I turn to the category of new media art, still recognizing the operational utility of the term itself, especially in the context of my reflections on the cultural history of institutions.

From the 1980s onwards, critical museum studies developed within the paradigms of the so-called new art history, whose task was to denaturalize the museum institution, deconstruct ideological and political discourses, revise museum practices that tended to absolutize and objectify historical narratives and artistic values, manifesting most fully in the fetishization of the notion of canon.¹⁶ The new museology sought to make the museum a self-critical and sensitive space for all the voices hitherto excluded from the official discourse. Texts by Mieke Bal or Peter Vergo demystified the ideological and universalist narratives stemming from the Enlightenment traditions of the institution, exposing the social hierarchies, exclusionary practices or establishment hegemony hiding behind the institutional façade. The development of critical museum studies coincides with the heyday of new media art initiatives, falls in the 1980s, when, according to Edward A. Shanken, electronic media left the underground, shaping the practical, theoretical and institutional basis for what became

¹¹ Ch. Paul, *New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions*, https://intelligentagent.com/writing_samples/CP_New_Media_Art_IC.pdf (accessed: 7.05.2025).

¹² S. Cook, B. Graham, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA–London 2010.

¹³ G. Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*, Routledge, New York 2007.

¹⁴ L. Voropai, *Medienkunst als Nebenproduct. Studien zur institutionellen Genealogie neuer künstlerischer Medien, Formen und Praktiken*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2017.

¹⁵ D. Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art*, Link Editions, Brescia 2013.

¹⁶ P. Piotrowski, *Muzeum krytyczne*, Dom Wydawniczy “Rebis”, Poznań 2011.

known as new media art.¹⁷ In the European art field, important exhibitions, symposia, festivals and biennials of new media art are emerging, sometimes becoming the seeds of future institutions: Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria 1979–), V2 Organization – Manifestation for Unstable Media (’s-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands 1986–1992), ISEA International Symposium of Electronic Art (Utrecht, Netherlands 1988, subsequent editions in other countries), International Experimental Audiovisual Festival (Arnhem, Netherlands 1985), European Media Art Festival (Osnabrück, Germany 1988), Multimediale (Karlsruhe, Germany 1989–1997), Digitart (Budapest, Hungary organized only twice, in 1986 and 1990), Mediawave (Gyor, Hungary 1991). At the same time there was also a real boom of video art festivals: Video Art (Locarno, Switzerland 1980), International Video, Film and Performance Festival VIPER (Luzerne, Switzerland 1980), after several editions renamed VIPER; World Wide Video Fest (first edition in The Hague 1982, last in Amsterdam 2004), Videonale (Bonn, Germany 1984), Semaine internationale de video (Geneva, Switzerland 1985), Videofest (Berlin, Germany 1988 since 2002 organized under the name Transmediale) and Bi-annual International Festival Vidéo (Liège, Belgium 1988). Although this list is far from complete it illustrates very well the dynamics of this decade, crucial for the future development of new media art especially in its institutional dimension. The list is completed by the WRO Sound-Based Visual Art Festival (Wrocław, Poland 1989), organized since 1989, a festival that I consider an example of the institutionalization of an independent initiative that played a key role in Poland’s digital transformation.¹⁸

From the WRO Sound Basis Visual Art Festival to WRO Art Center

In December 1989, barely a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a group of friends, graduates of the University of Wrocław, organized the WRO Sound Basis Visual Art Festival. Solidarity’s victory in the elections on 4 June that year removed the communist government from power, “the wind of history is blowing”¹⁹ and a breath of freedom was already felt in Poland. In this very much Latourian story, an important role belongs to heterogeneous human-non-human networks, formed by specific persons, practices, places, institutions, objects, technologies, which, in-

¹⁷ E.A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media*, op. cit.; Ch. Paul, *Digital Art*, op. cit.

¹⁸ P. Krajewski, *Festiwal WRO i początek zwrotu cyfrowego w Polsce* [in:] A. Jelewska, M. Krawczak (eds.), *Sztuka i technologia w Polsce. Od cyberkomunizmu do kultury makerów*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2014, pp. 43–49. Cf. Ch. van Assche, *On the Aesthetics and Museology of the New Media* [in:] G. Hatinger (ed.), *Objekt: Video*, Landesgalerie am Landesmuseum OÖ, Linz 1996, pp. 19–20; P. Krajewski, *An Inventory of Media Art Festivals* [in:] J. Krysa (ed.), *Data Browser 03 – Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*, Autonomedia, New York 2006, pp. 223–235.

¹⁹ K.I. Gałczyński, *Ballada o trzęsących się portkach* [in:] idem, *Serwus, Madonna. Wiersze i poematy*, ed. K. Gałczyńska, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1987, p. 277.

tertwined, determine its course, negotiating hidden senses and meanings. This first review of media art and interdisciplinary undertakings in this part of Europe is being prepared without the involvement of official cultural institutions and outside censorship by an independent cooperative of artists, researchers and enthusiasts of avant-garde art known as Open Studio WRO, composed of Violetta Kutlubasis-Krajewska, Piotr Krajewski and Zbigniew Kupisz.



Figure 1: Paul Panhausen (NL), *The Long String Instruments*. WRO 1989 – performance at Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre. Photo: Mirosław Emil Koch, courtesy of the WRO Art Center

“These are people from outside the so-called milieu coteries, i.e. groups shaped by years of resistance and conformity, which are characterized by mutual distrust, negative selection and networks of confining dependencies,”²⁰ Piotr Bikont observed in “Gazeta Wyborcza” at the time. The festival’s promoters are part of an alternative movement focused on a quest for new forms of artistic expression, aware of the transformations within art under the influence of technology. Violetta Kutlubasis-Krajewska is a member of the first Organizing Committee of the unprecedented international exhibition *Construction in Process*,²¹ an event initiated by Ryszard Waśko and organized under the auspices of the Solidarity Trade Union. It opened in Łódź on 26 October 1981, less than two months before martial law was introduced in Poland. Together

²⁰ P. Bikont, *Wideo to sztuka*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, No. 289, 12 December 1990.

²¹ A. Jach, A. Saciuk-Gąsowska (eds.), *Konstrukcja w procesie 1981 – wspólnota, która nadeszła? = Construction in Process 1981 – The Community That Came?*, trans. A. Grochulska, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2012.

with Piotr Krajewski, they later collaborated with the members of the Film Form Workshop (1970–1977),²² an important initiative from the standpoint of new media art history. Next to the Experimental Studio of the Polish Radio,²³ the activities of the neo-avant-garde Perfamo or Mona Lisa galleries, they contribute to the Polish tradition of artistic explorations one was able to engage in at the time of the post-Stalinist thaw. They establish relationships with young Łódź artists: Zbigniew Libera or Łódź Kaliska. By the time of the first Festival, they are already well embedded in the independent cultural milieu in Poland, but also well versed in the currents and phenomena within Western art. At that time, Zbigniew Kupisz is significantly involved in the Wrocław music community, whose members defy the official realities and its institutions. He is behind various alternative undertakings, a music producer, the manager of the band Klaus Mitffoch, a member of the Polish Jazz Association and the manager of Rura, one of the foremost jazz clubs in communist Poland – a haven of freedom for the young generation.

Restricted access to technological novelties had a severe and adverse impact on the relationship between art, science and technology in this part of Europe.²⁴ However, that temporary revival is followed by a crisis, largely linked to the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, which engenders a dystopian discourse, fuelling technophobic sentiments in Poland. In the 1980s, the previously developed artistic strategies created in the spirit of interdisciplinary dialogue with science and technology lose relevance as greater importance is attached to various forms of social engagement. The anti-communist happening movement *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* was active in Wrocław, exposing the absurdities of the system through parody and grotesque. The socio-political situation is very tense, while the tightening noose of repressions against artists broadens the scope of influence of grassroots countercultural phenomena that foster independent culture. The spirit of youthful defiance brings forth proto-networks based on strategies of media exchange, the rudiments of informal communication. This simultaneously mediatic and community paradigm would “largely, as Agnieszka Jelevska and Michał Krawczak argue, shape the critical notions of culture among the contemporary generation, for whom art and artistic activity became a form of community experience, by default belonging to the public domain.”²⁵

²² The Film Form Workshop consists of: Józef Robakowski, Paweł Kwiek, Wojciech Bruszewski, Zbigniew Rybczyński, Andrzej Różycki, Ryszard Waško, Jan Freda, Marek Koterski, Ryszard Lenczewski, Janusz Połom, Jacek Łomnicki, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Kazimierz Bendkowski, Krzysztof Krauze, Waław Antczak. See R.W. Kluszczyński (ed.), *Warsztat Formy Filmowej 1970–1977*, trans. U. Śniegowska, E. Kępa, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warszawa 2000.

²³ D. Crowley (ed.), *Ultra Sounds: The Sonic Art of Polish Radio Experimental Studio*, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, Berlin 2019.

²⁴ A. Jelevska, M. Krawczak (eds.), *Sztuka i technologia w Polsce. Od cyberkomunizmu do kultury makerów*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2014.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 32.



Figure 2: Preparations for an audiovisual concert by Studio Ch&K (Marek Chołoniewski and Krzysztof Knittel). WRO 1990 – the auditorium of Jerzy Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre, in the foreground, in front of the artists, a three-lamp video projector. Photo: Mirosław Emil Koch, courtesy of WRO Art Centre

This experience is shared by the festival’s organizers, who were heavily involved in the rise of Wrocław’s alternative scene in the 1980s: “On the one hand, WRO showed this whole network of declarative institutions which were created by the energy of the people supporting each other on a network-type basis, a dispersed network which, however, had a common mission. The feeling of the mission was very strong. We knew that we were participating in changes, we knew that these changes were shaped right there and then also by means of our activity.”²⁶

²⁶ V. Krajewska, P. Krajewski, D. Domagała (eds.), *Resonance*, WRO Center for Media Art Foundation, Wrocław 2019.



Figure 3: A viewer looking at the WRO 1991 exhibition at the National Museum in Wrocław. The photograph shows a fragment of Zbigniew Libera's video-object *Mystical Perseveration*. Photo: courtesy of the WRO Art Centre

The capital accumulated over the course of a decade, the contacts and networks established, are the foundation for their later activities as part of the first edition of the Sound Basis Visual Art Festival. The format adopted by the organisers involved a combination of meetings, presentations of works, exhibitions, workshops and concerts. This hybrid model reflects well the nature of all media events, for which the participatory and educational dimension was extremely important. They do not lack determination, optimism and faith in the success of their own venture. Still, they have to confront numerous organizational problems and, despite a large group of skeptics, push through a project that many find completely incomprehensible. In that troublesome period of political transition, cultural policy is relegated to the background as the country faces “more urgent” financial needs. The newspapers at the time were vocal about tightening the belt, cutting budgets, the disappearance of further festivals and cultural events.²⁷ “The city authorities could not afford such a festival and, indeed, they do not give a penny”, Piotr Krajewski admitted in “Gazeta Robotnicza”.²⁸ Towards the end of the 1980s, institutions are extremely underfunded, politicized, which translates into inertia in the milieu, who lack motivation and an

²⁷ L. Kletowa, *Pomysł z ulicy. Na pograniczu sztuk można zrobić stworzyć wideo-festiwal*, “Pt” 1989, Vol. 52/53, No. 404/405.

²⁸ *Nowy festiwal we Wrocławiu: połączenie sztuki z biznesem*, “Gazeta Robotnicza”, 30 November 1989.

idea for a course of action in the new post-communist realities. The Sound Basis Visual Art Festival becomes a remedy for the institutional crisis – which only exacerbated after the martial law – and the accompanying boycott of the official centres of culture and art. The grassroots, independent event in Wrocław event fills a major gap as an important venue where novel phenomena in Polish and European art alike may be presented which adapts audiences to technological and civilisational change.

Organizing the event is a grind, hard to imagine and understand today given the capabilities of online communication and human mobility, which is why entire families and personal networks are engaged. One of the protagonists in the story is a pre-war typewriter which belonged to Viola Kutlubasis-Krajewska's grandfather: the only technical means the organizers had to disseminate information about this pioneering initiative. Thousands of handwritten or typed letters addressed to artists around the globe, sponsors, companies, institutions are sent by post or telex. Thousands of kilometres travelled in search of support, hours upon hours of conversations held to convince people that the project itself is worthwhile. "Believing that we are doing an outstanding event, something incredibly important, we tried to convey it to both artists and institutions. And you can see here that we succeeded."²⁹

The first edition of WRO was co-created by the Open Studio Cooperative and the Polish Jazz Association, Wrocław Branch, in direct co-operation with the Feature Film Studio, local television network Antena 5, OPRF Visual Education Association and the District Film Distribution Institution. The scope of assistance the event receives varies greatly. Wrocław-based institutions provide mainly symbolic support, offering their premises and, occasionally, the equipment needed to present the submitted works. The initiative is also promoted by the unquestionable authority of Urszula Czartoryska and Ryszard Stanisławski from the Museum of Art in Łódź. Special shows are also held by leading international institutions of the regular art world, such as Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée d'Orsay or the California Institute of the Art, entities associated with new media art, whose institutional status was not yet established: Ars Electronica from Linz or the Manifestation Internationale de Vidéo et Télévision de Montbéliard, as well as corporate associates, which in the first editions included ITI and Berlin-based Softronic. The enthusiasm and willingness of the invited guests to participate in the event is so great that artists and representatives of institutions, jurors and judges come to Wrocław at their own expense.

The chief obstacle to organizing such a large, international event are limited technical possibilities, lack of the required festival equipment, thanks to which one could acquaint themselves with the material submitted by international authors and subsequently present it.³⁰ An anecdote/legend has it that the festival selection was carried out during night-time screenings at the Academy of Medicine, the only Wrocław

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 8.

³⁰ In any case, everything was in short supply, even the paper needed to print publicity material for the first edition or related correspondence, as it was rationed at the time. See: V. Krajewska, P. Krajewski, D. Domagała (eds.), *Resonance*, op. cit.

institution to possess U-matic tape players, whose premises were made available after hours solely courtesy of friendly medics.³¹ Paradoxically, since the 1960s, the Wrocław-based Elwro Electronic Works had been producing successive iterations of the *Odra* computer, but these were inaccessible to individual users and, as the communist central planning would have it, they were intended exclusively for use in industry and science. This situation epitomizes the profound issues resulting from Poland's technological backwardness at the time, the aftermath of its long isolation due to post-war dependence on the Soviet Union. The efforts of the organizers are concentrated on acquiring sponsors and professional equipment to enable the planned events to take place.



Figure 4: Krzysztof Skarbek and Odra River Pearl Divers, intermedia action. WRO 1991 – performance in the foyer of the Contemporary Theatre in Wrocław. Photo: Mirosław Emil Koch, courtesy of WRO Art Centre

The festival centre is housed in two small private flats on the outskirts of Wrocław and in the legendary Rura jazz club. Concerts are held in the café of the neo-Baroque Monopol Hotel, and Poland's first video installation, consisting of nine TV sets, is set up in its street-facing window. Initially, the display was to feature footage of the most interestingly captured wedding ceremonies, submitted by amateurs as part of a competition announced before the festival. However, no one responds to the newspaper ad. Archival photographs show people – ordinary passers-by – look with curiosity at

³¹ T. Miarecki, *Archiwum w szufladzie, selekcja w szpitalu*, WRO Archive.

the display window of the run-down enterprise, where computer animations would eventually be shown.



Figure 5: Poland's first video installation in public space. WRO 1989 shop window of the Monopol Hotel, Wrocław, Poland. Photo: courtesy of the WRO Art Centre

The concert by Kormorany in the abandoned and dilapidated water tower Na Grobli will make history of the first edition of WRO. The venue could hardly be reached by public transport due to biting cold conditions. In order to see the legendary *Cucumber Road Opera*, one had to “walk at least a kilometre or two in the cold and on ice”, not infrequently falling over on the way.³²

Everything has the hallmarks of novelty, not only in view of the state-of-the-art equipment (the first computer printout of the festival poster, made using the now-for-

³² V. Krajewska, P. Krajewski, D. Domagała (eds.), *Resonance*, op. cit.

gotten linotype technique, Poland's first ever displays using a video projector), but also in terms of exposure to artistic practices which used to be completely inaccessible to a broader audience, dismissed by all museums or public collections that operated in Poland at the time. The organizers still very vividly recollect the long queues of the festival-goers lining up to see a computer live.

The first edition of the Sound Basis Visual Art Festival included video workshops open to the public, computer image processing workshops, and the presentation of more than 200 works from around the world, including interactive installations, performances, video shows, visual-musical actions, computer films, etc.



Figure 6: Open Workshop of Computer Graphics and Animation, classes led by Jakub Tatarkiewicz (SAD Macintosh; sits at Apple graphics workstation). WRO 1990 Small Salon of the BWA Gallery in Wrocław. Photo: courtesy of the WRO Art Centre

The importance of the festival is reflected in the composition of the jury, composed of Isabelle Seigneur (Manifestation Internationale de Vidéo et Télévision de Montbéliard), Erwan Depenanster (Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris), Andrzej Kołodyński (International Short Film Festival in Kraków), Piotr Krajewski (WRO Festival), Anatoly Prokhorov (Studio Pilot in Moscow), Michael Scroggins (California Institute of The Arts in Valencia) and Stefan Szczyпка ("Komputer" magazine), awarded two works out of more than 120 in the main competition: Jan Brzuszek's *Where This Road Leads* and Rafał Bogusławski's *0*. In the open competition, it sin-

gled out Cécile Babiolle for *Menagerie*, Mirosław Koch for *Paradise 69* and Hanno Baethe for *Drehmoment*. The outcome of WRO 89, Krajewski argues, was “to draw attention to the phenomenon of electronic art heralding impending cultural and civilisational transformations.”³³



Figure 7: Installation by Enrique Fontanilles (ES/CH) (author first from left). WRO 91 exhibition at the National Museum in Wrocław, December 1991. Photo: Mirosław Emil Koch, courtesy of WRO Art Centre

³³ P. Krajewski, *Festiwal WRO...*, op. cit., p. 44.

The success of the event exceeded the expectations of the promoters themselves. The festival received ongoing coverage in the newspapers, on local and national television or regional and nationwide radio networks. Numerous domestic and international cultural weeklies dedicated to culture wrote about it as well, with the first review published in the Berlin city magazine “Tip”.³⁴ Following the first edition of WRO 89, Tomasz Miarecki noted in “Gazeta Robotnicza”: “Thanks to the Festival, we have entered the international structures of video art, which will make it possible to promote Polish video-vision artists abroad.”³⁵ Pieces by Józef Robakowski, Piotr Bikont, Mirosław Koch, Barbara Konopka or Jan Brzuszek were presented at the Manifestation Internationale de Vidéo et Télévision de Montbéliard, one of the longest-standing and largest media events in Europe at the time. Artists took part in the Scandinavian Icares festival in Aarhus, or the Brazilian Fotoptica VideoBrazil.³⁶ Through its successive editions, WRO joined a global network of various international communities engaged in artistic experimentation, exploring the possibilities and testing the limits of technology. After organizing the first three editions, Piotr Krajewski stated: “A network of exchange was born. Thanks to being present at WRO, artists started to gain global visibility. They started to travel, have contacts. And it all began to develop in a way that a certain critical mass was reached and we no longer had to animate certain things.”³⁷

Consequently, the circle of persons and institutions supporting the initiative expands, reflecting directly in the reputation of the event itself, which is recognized each year by an increasingly broader audience. The success of the idea, however, came at a price of gigantic effort of the entire team. The promoters grow doubtful: “Well, that was the moment when we realized that the annual mode would doom us to compromise, to rush, to some kind of routine of having a festival in December each year. And we thought to ourselves that this is the end of it.”³⁸ With the last of their money, they buy a black Panasonic fax machine with a microcassette answering machine and start thinking up the festival anew. The key decision is to change the formula, which is largely dictated by climatic considerations. December festivals caused quite a few production problems: “I remember the last WRO as being Siberian, like. There was no snow, it was just freezing and terribly cold and no club to meet in, because the venues we used before were being refurbished, while the new ones weren’t there yet.”³⁹ As of 1993, the WRO Sound Basis Visual Art Festival becomes WRO Biennale held in May, with guaranteed funding from the city and its own offices.

³⁴ V. Krajewska, P. Krajewski, D. Domagała (eds.), *Resonance*, op. cit.

³⁵ T. Miarecki, *WRO89. Siedem dni z wideo-artem*, “Gazeta Robotnicza”, 11 December 1989.

³⁶ V. Krajewska, P. Krajewski, D. Domagała (eds.), *Resonance*, op. cit.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Conclusions

“Electronics and art have a future. They know it all over the world. On the Wisła and Odra rivers, a few enthusiasts are trying to convince our unbelievers of this. Will they succeed? – asked Tomasz Miarecki in “Gazeta Robotnicza” in 1989.⁴⁰ It has been 35 years since the first, December Sound Basis Visual Art Festival. WRO continues to function, while retaining its status as an independent institution, pursuing the ideas of the past. It undertakes “a wide range of activities, in the original model of the WRO Laboratory, combining competences from innovative, creative, scientific and technological, to educational and organisational, experimenting with tools and ways of disseminating art, creating its own original solutions and elaborations of exhibitions, artistic objects, educational activities, art documentation, and multimedia publications.”⁴¹ Historically and retrospectively, the emergence of the WRO Sound Basis Visual Art Festival in 1989 was certainly a symptomatic expression of the “festivisation” and “biennialisation” of the international artistic and, above all, media-artistic process that began at the end of the 1980s, significantly influencing the consolidation process of the new media art world community throughout Europe. By recording dynamic processes, it heralded the beginning of a new technological paradigm that poses enormous challenges for new media art institutions. Given the changes taking place in the world in the age of globalization, as well as the dominance of technoscience, late capitalism and climate change, the way we understand the social functions of institutions is subject to far-reaching revisions. In addition, under the neoliberal socio-economic agendas, new media art institutions confront increasing market pressure and restrictions on public funding, making the need to describe the new media art world, in all its diversity and singularity, all the more urgent.

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⁴⁰ T. Miarecki, *WRO89...*, op. cit.

⁴¹ See <https://wrocenter.pl/pl/o-wro/> (accessed: 7.05.2025).

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