

# UNDERSTANDING MEDIA THROUGH THE VISUAL ARTS

by Renate Buschmann

## MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S INSIGHTS INTO MEDIA

In 1964, media theorist Marshall McLuhan turned "Understanding Media" into a slogan when he published his eponymous book. McLuhan's insights were groundbreaking, considering the rise of electronic communication and automation that were beginning to reshape the workforce and daily life. He was among the first scholars to dissect the structural features of media and their profound impact on societal reality. For McLuhan, "understanding media" went beyond their technical construction and usage, extending to a media-anthropological perspective that examined the long-term social ramifications of expanding technologies. Today, McLuhan's observations seem prophetic, encapsulating many principles that now underpin our networked and digitised world. His insights, which were condensed into the now slogan "The medium is the message" (and later modified by himself to "The medium is the massage"), have inspired generations of artists to think about media affinity in conjunction with media criticism. Art that incorporates contemporary technologies often reflects both, seeking to sensitise viewers to the unique phenomena and characteristics of each medium while prompting reflections on the social implications of media use.

## MEDIA-AFFINE AND MEDIA-CRITICAL ARTISTS

For the past 60 years, however, artists have quite naturally gravitated towards emerging technologies. Since then, there appears to be no technical innovation that has not been artistically explored. Artists frequently adopt new media early, pushing the boundaries of conventional usage to probe their potential.

In particular, when technical processes are used to record, edit, produce, reproduce and display static and moving images, they soon attract the attention of artists. This is because a new visual culture is beginning to emerge, the potential of which artists want to help shape a digitality in which images have a different material nature, achieve broader distribution, and are subject to completely different reproduction, appropriation, and manipulation techniques.

## PIONEERING ART WORKS REFLECTING MEDIA

Artists, independent and non-conformist, engage with new media to express their observations and insights through artistic means in order to draw attention to the extent and impacts of the respective media development. Fiddling around, experimenting and even programming are part of their research-based artistic practice that aims to explore visionary goals and critically addresses misgivings and doubts. Art remains an eye-opener for ethical and social issues caused by technological media. The following pioneering works reflect emerging media of their respective time:



With television emerging as a mass medium, artists began to both critique and explore its impact. The way in which television sets broadcast visual stimuli into the homes day after day with news reports, adverts and entertainment was so fundamentally different from the tradition of perceiving images that it inevitably aroused the interest of artists from the 1960s onwards.



**Nam June Paik**, whose flickering TV sculptures can now be found in museums all over the world, elevated television sets and their visual aesthetics to objects of artistic exploration. As early as in 1963, Paik concentrated on the manipulation of electronic television images, eventually creating vibrant audio-visual worlds. He foresaw television as a new visual language, echoing McLuhan's prediction of the "Global Village" (1962) as an appeal to make television a field of action for artistic videos.

Nam June Paik, "Brandenburger Tor"  
© Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln mit Rheinischem Bildarchiv, (rba\_c015840)

© Dara Birnbaum, "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman", 1979, © Dara Birnbaum  
Courtesy of Stiftung IMAI - Inter Media Art Institute, Düsseldorf

**Dara Birnbaum** began working with video technology as it entered the consumer market. The ability to record television programmes was brand-new and inspired the artist to visually comment on contemporary American television culture and its influence on society. The artist isolated key scenes and remixed them using the sampling method, which later became popular in music videos.

Birnbaum's video "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman" (1979) is a critical appropriation of the prominent entertainment series of the same name and exposes traditional female role models by highlighting the magical transformation into the heroine.



© Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Foto © ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Foto F. Wamhof

In 1969, the artist duo **Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider** amazed an unsuspecting exhibition audience with the installation "Wipe Cycle", which allowed visitors to see themselves in real-time amidst commercial TV broadcasts. Watching oneself on a screen was something out of the ordinary, as television at that time was produced exclusively by official broadcasters. Very few visitors were aware of what the new video technology could do. "Wipe Cycle" was a vision of future self-broadcasting capabilities.

**Frank Gillette und Ira Schneider,**  
"Wipe Cycle" / 1969, Reconstruction 2017  
→ [zkm.de/en/artwork/wipe-cycle](http://zkm.de/en/artwork/wipe-cycle)

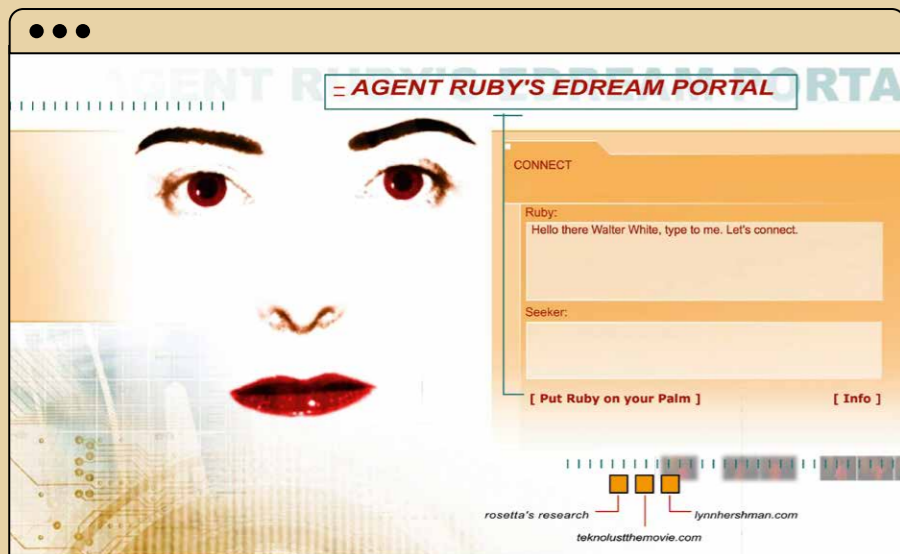


© Julia Scher, "The Schürmann House", 1991,  
Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach, Foto: Renate Buschmann

**Julia Scher** highlighted the dual nature of video technology—its role in self-expression and surveillance. The general public enjoyed the advantages of recording videos and renting copies for home cinema but ignored the downside of constant surveillance in public spaces. Scher's installations evoke the creeping discomfort of being watched by mechanical eyes, questioning the implications for personal privacy and security.



With the public debut of the World Wide Web, artists embraced global networking and the new, initially unregulated and commercial-free space by creating art in the form of websites, soon dubbed net art. Learning to understand on-line spaces in their dimensions of communication and interaction was coupled with a desire to create something new and to explore possibilities for global interaction.



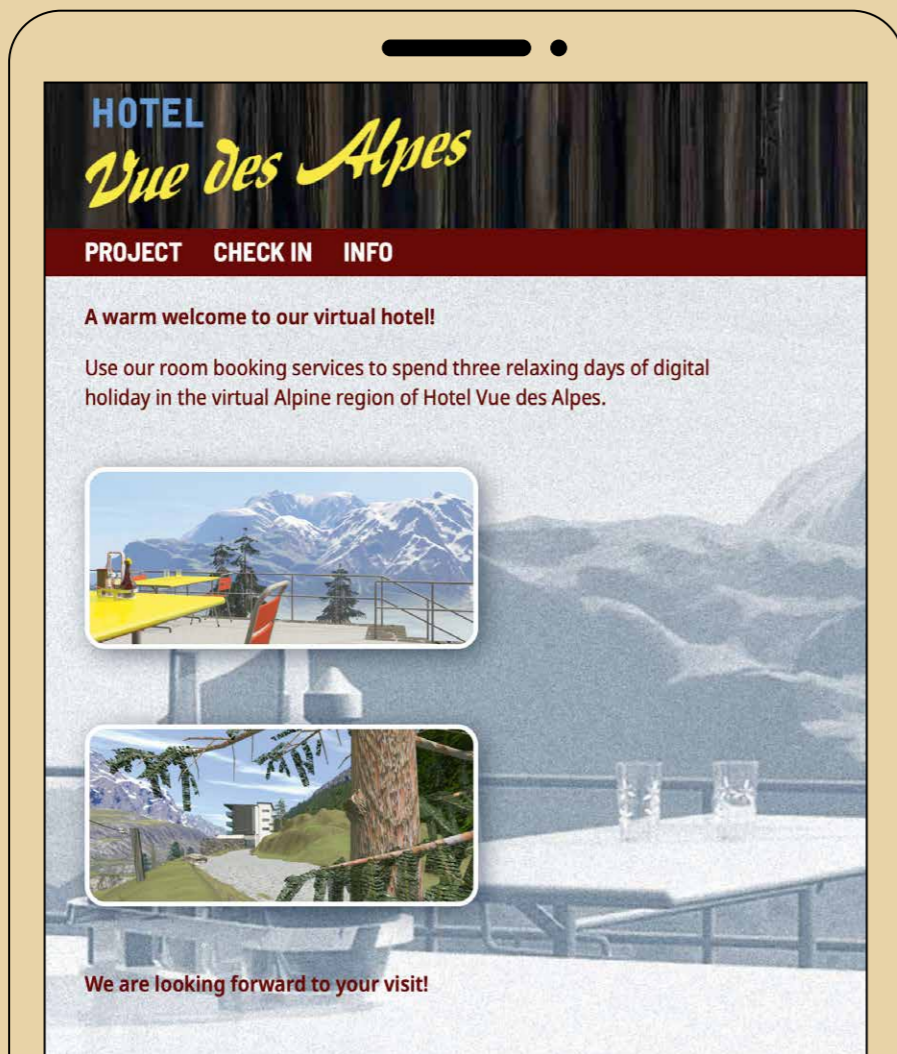
© Lynn Hershman-Leeson

With "Agent Ruby", **Lynn Hershman Leeson** put the willingness of internet users to communicate with a programme to the test. In 1999, long before virtual assistants such as Siri or Alexa, the artist uploaded the female avatar, which to this day invites visitors to the website to chat and dream together while flawlessly mimicking facial expressions. The initial fear of chatting with "Agent Ruby" has long since vanished, and the website serves as a reference point for tracking the development of online media.

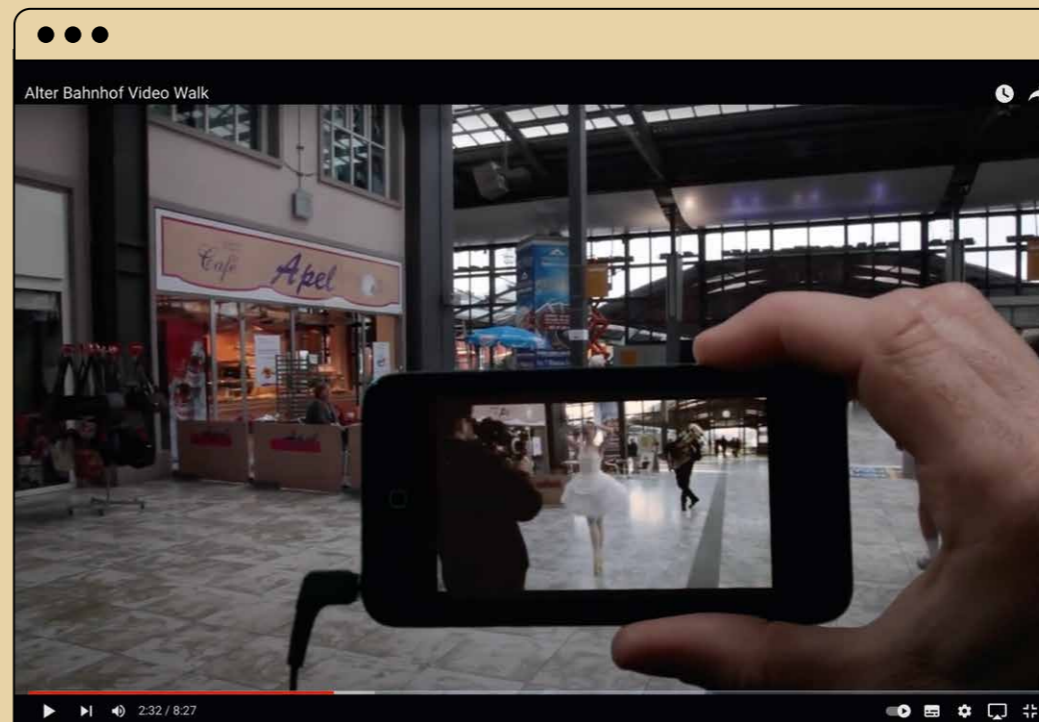
→ [agentruby.sfmoma.org](http://agentruby.sfmoma.org)

In 2000, the collective **Monica Studer & Christoph van den Berg** opened a mountain hotel without physical location when "virtual travelling" was not yet a concept. Since then, the website [www.vuedesalpes.com](http://www.vuedesalpes.com) has made it possible to explore the cosy hotel and the alpine landscape as if in a video game. This virtual mountain hotel project allowed for exploration of an idyllic, non-existent space, prefiguring the digital world's role as a surrogate for real experiences.

→ [vuedesalpes.com](http://vuedesalpes.com)



© Monica Studer Christoph van den Berg



Video still from the documentary, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0kQE7m31Pw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0kQE7m31Pw)

For about 10 years now, there have been more and more attempts to break down the strict separation between physical and digital spaces. An early augmented reality project was created by the artist duo **Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller** at documenta 13 in Kassel in 2012. With the help of borrowed iPods, visitors to the "Alter Bahnhof Video Walk" were able to experience the superimposition of digital storytelling onto a real environment. The novelty has since given way to the problematic expectation of apps to provide participatory access to everyday life and art.

→ [cardiffmiller.com/walks/alter-bahnhof-video-walk](http://cardiffmiller.com/walks/alter-bahnhof-video-walk)

Just recently, the artist collective **Blast Theory**, in collaboration with scientists, conducted the twelve-day project "Cat Royale", which explored AI's impact on life quality through observing cat interactions with their robotic pet-sitter. During the project, the public had the opportunity to watch the project via video streaming. The project is only of secondary importance for zoological studies, as it primarily raises questions about human trust in machine learning.

→ [blasttheory.co.uk/catroyale](http://blasttheory.co.uk/catroyale)



© "Cat Royale" by Blast Theory. Image credit: Ruler