

Public comments
on the web site of the Ars Electronica CodedocII exhibition
Antoine Schmitt - September 2003

From : <http://www.aec.at/de/festival2003/programm/codedoc/schmitt/comments.html>

It was very difficult for me to accept to join the CODEDOCII show, as I was the first one to publicly criticize the first CODEDOC, on the eu-gene mailing-list.

My point was that the code of an artwork is like the brushes and paint of a painter : you dont show these alongside the finished painting. In programmed art, the produced artwork is the execution of the program, not the text (the code) that describes it.

Of course, if an artist-programmer wants to show his code alongside his artwork, this is fine; it is the artist's choice, just like showing the chemical composition of some paint alongside the painting done with it is an artistic posture in itself. This is what Alex McLean did with `forkbomb.pl` : it was confrontation of the simplicity of the program to its dramatic results that was the artwork. If the code had not been shown, it would not have been interesting at all. This is also what Alex Galloway did in CODEDOC I: it was showing the dangerous code and **not** executing it that created the artwork.

So for me:

- one has no reason to ask an artist-programmer to show the code of his work in an exhibition if it is not his/her choice in the beginning.
- I, for myself, have no artistic piece where showing the code is interesting as an artwork.

But then I read the assignment for CODEDOC, and saw that it was the curator's choice to show the code, and for the following reasons (correct me if I am wrong) :

- demystify the programming process
- show the relationship between the code and its result
- compare coding practices and programming langages

So it was all about the artistic craftsmanship, and not about the code as an artwork. So in a way, it was more like a documentary about artists who use a specific material than an art exhibition. This made me accept the assignment of CODEDOCII, and play the rules of the game. I indeed think that it is very important to demystify programming : there is just much too much baloney around on this matter.

Still, I am concerned by the reception of this exhibition by the public, and by how it may distord the public's idea of programmed art.

- there is a good chance that when asked to show their code, artists will have the tendency to "clean it up". So the shown programs will be clean, in the programming sense. But a clean program in the programming sense does not make a good artwork. I have been a programmer for 25 years, and I have seen everything in the relationship between a program and its result : awfully written programs that are absolutely the best at what they do, and very clean programs that are very bad at what they do. The "cleanness" of a program is a value only in an engineering environment : for economic reasons, a program needs to be efficient, maintainable, readable, modularisable, portable, etc.. All these values are not interesting for an artwork (in the first place). And this show may induce a wrong idea in the public's mind : that a well written program is important in an artwork. It may create a link between good craftsmanship or programming virtuosity and artistic value. I say it

again here : a program is what it does, not how it is written, even and especially in the art world.

- the second reason for my concern is the technological focus that this exhibition puts on programmed art. Most non-programmers will not understand anything about the program codes that they see in the exhibition, and may be repulsed by this, when all they were looking for was new and interesting art. There is a real danger that this exhibition may become an insider's forum, where only those who know can understand something about programming. And the other ones may leave with the idea that programmed art is just about complex technology.

And finally, I want to react on the assignment's assertion that "Every medium may have its specific language but in digital art, this language has a quite literal rather than figurative manifestation. The visual results of an artwork are derived from the language of code." This phrase creates a shortcut and an approximation that is misleading. The language in which the program is written has absolutely nothing to do with the language of programmed artworks. It would be like saying that english (the language in which scenarii are written) has something to do with the language of cinema. The language of the programmed artworks has yet to be created, we are at the beginning of an era, and this language will arise slowly with the history of programmed art. And it will have nothing to do with the language in which the programs are written, it will have to do with what the artworks do, it will be about space, time and action.

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See also, Christiane Paul's introduction to the CODeDOC II exhibition
http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=12323