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Open Codes. Sharing Digital Worlds

Colophon

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Open Codes reflects the world we live in today. It is a world that is created and controlled by codes and brings computing and art together in various ways, as Peter Weibel, the initiator and curator of the first two instantiations of *Open Codes* at ZKM | Karlsruhe put it:

“Today we live significant portions of our lives in an artificial, human-made world of data. Digital codes provide access to this world. When we turn on a mobile phone, for example, we are immediately confronted with the prompt “enter passcode.” In Paris it is also commonplace to get into a house or room by entering a numerical code at the door. Codes are crucial keys for access to our contemporary world, both analogue and digital.”¹

The exhibition engages critically with computation and attempts to open its “black boxes” with a purpose of raising the standards of digital literacy of visitors in an inclusive way by turning the museum into an active platform that fosters knowledge exchange.

Based on the idea that the museum will be understood as a “space for thinking”² and a platform for knowledge exchange, the exhibition is not only accompanied by, but spatially coexists with the time-based events that combine practical knowledge of computer code and critical artistic approaches in a single venue.

Open Codes focused not only on the mediation of the displayed artworks but on embrace the issues and questions raised by those working in various fields. Besides the curators and the art mediation team of the ZKM | Karlsruhe,³ other experts and NGOs were also included in deciding the exhibition events and programs. With this approach, we were able to welcome diverse communities and extend the pool of knowledge featured in *Open Codes*.

Since the exhibition themes cover a wide scale of topics, a taxonomy seems necessary to help the visitors navigate this complexity. Tags were assigned to eight main categories: the #GenealogyofCode elaborates on the history of computation with an emphasis on software; #Encoding generally reflects on computability; #MachineLearning includes works that are created with the aid of machine learning algorithms or critically engage with the socio-political and ethical connotations of artificial intelligence; #AlgorithmicGovernance refers to the transformation of decision-making processes, which is being increasingly outsourced

1
Peter Weibel,
“Editorial Phase I,”
*Open Codes. Living
in Digital Worlds*,
https://zkm.de/en/
editorial-phase-i.

2
Simon Sheikh,
“Objects
of Study or
Commodification
of Knowledge?
Remarks on Artistic
Research,” *Art &
Research*, vol. 2,
no. 2, 2009.

3
Open Codes at
ZKM was curated
by Peter Weibel,
with the co-
curators Blanca
Giménez, Yasemin
Keskinetepe and
the author of this
text. Advisors
from various
fields helped our
work, including
Natalia Fuchs,
Christian Lölkes,
and Franz Pichler,
and the Museum
Communication
Department under
the leadership
of Janine Burger
supported the
development of
the educational
program.

to computational agents; #Labour&Production relates to the conditions of software production, as well as the impact of automation on job markets worldwide; the more specific topic of #AlgorithmicEconomy mostly engages with recent phenomena, such as high frequency trading, blockchain and cryptocurrencies, and computational developments that fundamentally changed stock exchange markets and may change fiscal systems around the world; #VirtualReality discusses the specific feature and capability of computers to generate immersive imagery that we perceive as a reality without the agency of matter; and finally, #GeneticCode not only refers to the fact that all living organisms are encoded in DNA, but to the connections between genetics and computation, as in, for example, data storage techniques.

After the success of the first version of *Open Codes* in Karlsruhe, it became clear that the experiment should not close down after a few months but be extended, to bring forth a new version with a different subtitle and focus. And encouragingly, NJP Art Center realized the exhibition "Networked Commons," as a sequel to the ZKM exhibition *Open Codes* that took place from 20th October 2017 until 2nd June 2019, conceived and curated by Peter Weibel.

This exhibition series started with *Open Codes. Living in Digital Worlds*, followed by a second at ZKM under the title *Open Codes. The World as a Field of Data*. For this exhibition Christian Lölkes and Peter Weibel created a special installation, consisting of dozens of monitors hanging from the ceiling. In earlier times, sailors navigated the ocean with the help of constellations of stars. Today, people navigate their life with the help of screens full of data. In the office, in the hospital, at the airport, at home, and in the train, people constantly stare computer screens. We are all linked and connected to the internet.

In the meantime, two satellites were organized in Mumbai at the Max Müller Bhavan Gallery of the Goethe-Institute under the titles *Open Codes. Digital Culture Techniques* (2018) and *Open Codes. The Art of Coding* (2019). Larger scale versions were exhibited at Chronus Art Center Shanghai (*Open Codes. Connected Bots*, 2019) and at Azkuna Zentroa Bilbao (*Open Codes. We Are Data*, 2019/20), and a few further smaller excerpts of the exhibition at various venues in Germany.

Each new title emphasized the evolving thematic focus, although most of the eight themes were kept unchanged and the selection of artworks and artifacts were dynamically changing from

exhibition to exhibition. Inclusion of additional artistic projects from the exhibition's region has been one of the principles all curators of the series followed to embed the exhibition in its location and cultural context, even if one would generally assume that computer code is international and no local dialects color the strict syntax of programming languages.

The exhibition reached its final destination at NJP Art Center where it was adapted significantly. Thanks to the curatorial work of Yoonseo Kim, the exhibition includes various contributions of Korean artists that correspond with the principles of *Open Codes* as well as the chosen additional title *Networked Commons*.

Commons, specifically, digital and networked commons are phenomena inherent to the tenet of *Open Codes*, and thus it comes as no surprise that it at last gains specific attention. Albeit the series' various iterations previously laid focus on data, code, and code as cultural technique, the social impacts of computing and the implications of digital culture on museums are central to the concept of *Open Codes*. The idea of digital commons is implicitly present in the ideals of free software and open data movements, which left their traces in the ZKM's exhibition halls though the presence and active contribution of the movements' representatives. Along this line, the topic of networked commons was chosen to summarize the essence of *Open Codes*, and at the same time to react to the ramifications of the pandemic, which forced museum visitors to a networked absence from community spaces.

On the other hand, NJP Art Center has already engaged with the topic in the last years,⁴ which influenced the choice as well. NJP Art Center focused the various aspects of the commons in general, whether digital or analog, while the last manifestation of *Open Codes* engages specifically with networked digital commons and maps out its history and infrastructure.

The general concept of the commons is relatively easy to explain—resources that are not owned privately but used and maintained by community—but when it comes to the details and social implications, it becomes a complex task to give a well-rounded definition. This is specifically true for the digital commons, since its technological basis is in constant flux and also in “radical expansion.”⁵ Nevertheless, it is certain that digital commons “comprises informational resources created and shared within voluntary communities of varying size and interests,” as Felix Stalder put it. He adds that “the emergence of the digital commons is one expression of a historical shift from the industrial economy (Fordism) to the networked economy. (...) This commons represents a third model of social production, neither dependent on the state nor oriented towards the market, even though it may partially overlap with both.”⁶ The internet plays a paradigmatic role in the effort

4
Specifically, the motto of the 10th anniversary project to be #Art #Commons #NamJunePaik (2018-19) focused on the relationships among art and politics, economy and society.

5
Bill Balaskas, “Networked Media and the Rise of Alternative Institutions: Art and Collaboration after 2008,” *Institution as Praxis: New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021), 180-196.

6
Felix Stalder, “Digital Commons,” *The Human Economy: A World Citizen's Guide* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 313-324.

to collaborate differently on the common good and to oppose the ramifications of data capitalism. Digital artistic practices and net.art have been developing together and contributing to the networked commons.⁷

Open Codes reacts to the idea of networked digital commons on the two levels from its beginning, in that it has been integrating works of art based on accessible source code available online⁸ and has contributed to the forming of communities based on the common interest in digital literacy. With this feature, *Open Codes* elaborated a suggestion for exhibition making, in which themes and methods are deliberately intertwined.

7
Various examples for the early intersections of networked commons and media art are mentioned by Christiane Paul, in "Digital Art/Public Art: Governance and Agency in the Networked Commons," *First Monday online journal*, 2010, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1616/1531>.

8
Just to name two examples; Cornelia Sollfrank, *net.art generator* and Bleeptrack, *Wikidata Card Game Generator*.