Book Review -   THE ART OF HACKING: Intersections Between Hacker Culture and Visual Arts by Juli Laczko

Review by Victoria Neumann

When it comes to hacker culture, there are stories satellites on tech enthusiasts like hobby radio amateurs or elitist university and research institute-based men from diverse STEM fields such as mathematics, physics or engineering. And even though a latter amended section in the hacker ethics states that "You can create art and beauty on a computer." The intersection and indeed entanglements between art and hacker culture is still under-represented. Juli Laczko's Book 'THE ART OF HACKING: Intersections Between Hacker Culture and Visual Arts' bridges this gap and shows how much of hacking is rooted in or connected to methodologies found in visual and avant-garde art.

Structure and Content of the Book

The title here is already hinting what the book is setting out to do: Building a synthesis of two seemingly binary components. The first part of the book turns to the history and definitions of hacker cultures. This includes topics like free software, lockpicking or phreaking as well as some critiques and ambiguity around what counts as hacking. Readers familiar with hacker history will not find anything new in this epitome, and some lack of detail -which is probably due length restrictions- it could be an easy target of superficial criticism if it wouldn't be for the rejection of a purely chronological order towards a thematic-based approach. This makes the subchapters into individual pieces that can be taken out as an example, e.g. for teaching and in the end become more than sum of all (the) divisors. This makes the first two chapters after the introduction a lightweight and pleasurable read, for the novice and advanced readers alike.

While the book isn't about writing a comprehensive and exhaustive conclusion about hackers, the first two chapters only hint at the multiple stings of interconnectedness, the third chapter starts to set the scene of the interconnectedness of hacker cultures and certain practices within it such as critical making and hacktivism and art. The major contribution of the book really begins in the later chapters. Showing how divergent, counter-culture practices and art methodologies are interwoven in the fabrics of hacking gives the reader a smooth introduction into the next part of the book which examines the avant-garde methodologies. At this stage it becomes clear why the history and scene setting was necessary: the comparison between the processes and methodologies of avant-garde are only made possible by having studied the history of hacking and it's political dimension first. Otherwise the connection between 0-day exploits and 'La Fontaine' might not be as obvious, but Laczko bridges this by showing how novelty and provocation or the circumvention of social norms can become a powerful in its performative. The author does this for many other sections, showing how political values, motivation and practices come together Dada, Anonymous, anarchism, cyber

vigilantism, just to name a few. For those not having studied art history or hacking, there are plenty of illustrations that help map these across the subchapters.

Finally, the book ends with show casing an array of projects that are showing these interconnections. In some examples like the Female Extention or BorderXing, the use of technology to subvert regimes of oppression and restrictions, may they stem from gender or border politics are crystal clear. Others are less like the Sterile Field, the connection to intellectual property rights and hence the struggle of free software in the earlier parts of the book are left to the reader to make. This might be due to a certain type of learning still prevalent in elitist art that is about overwhelming the reader or user as a means to make them start critically thinking for themselves instead of being spoon-fed. However, while some of the net art projects leave out an in-depth analysis, they are similar to the first subchapters about hacking history and definitions: a synopsis rather than a conclusion.

Relevance of the book

Laczko has written a dense book, which will be of invaluable use for teaching in different contexts such as computer science, social science and art and design. The lengths and way it is structured makes the different subchapters easily independently readable, so they can be used to emphasize specific learning goals. Further, throughout the book there are multiple forms of critiquing the myth of white male-dominated invention, innovation and participation in hacking and computing alike. May it be the question of women's labour in early computing or the contributions to hardware and software (to cite a passage from the book: "the engineers Masatoshi Shima and Tadashi Sasaku, working for Busicom and Sharp, 'took over' the concept of the single-chip CPU from a (still unnamed) woman, who participated in a brainstorming session as a student at Nara Women's College"), the book shows how it was and still is shrugged off. Laczko's book here becomes part of feminist technoscience works in and around hacker culture (and often craft) that encounters the erasing of women and other minority groups is part of framing technologies around white, masculine virtues, i.e. engineering-focused, pragmatic, etc. The question if these virtues also contribute to the under-representation of art (as it might be seen as feminine and soft) in hacking, remains to be answered by the readers. However, by establishing the connection between methods, political motivations, and practices the book contributes to making and extending spaces in which we can think and learn of hacking differently, that are not subordinate to these myths.