DETOX - Curators statement
By Stahl Stenslie, 1999.

Electronic media have changed forever the way we look at and sense things. The digital era has given us a plastic culture because i) everything can be digitised and ii) everything digital can be controlled artificially and transformed electronically. DETOX is an artistic reaction to the new digital opportunities, utopias and nightmares.

We no longer look at our reflection in immanent, timeless expressions, but in digital, transient and unstable images. This is particularly true in popular media such as MTV and computer games. MTV’s pop heroes seldom appear without some form of digital halo and electronic magic. In computer games, images have become like humans: responsive, impressionable and alive - to put it succinctly: interactive. Where museums and books once gave us an insight into strange worlds, we are now able to travel ourselves over the Internet. Globally, from the safe confines of our living rooms and at the speed of an electron. If this digital tele-presence becomes too cool and distanced, what about the hypersensory room of the Techno stage? Where the DJ and the dancing audience melt together to form one organism - mated in an orgy of light, music and visual stimuli mixed in real-time.

The digital universe is a creative room. It gives us new tools and opportunities to construct radical new realities and other experiences. We are experiencing a natural cultural-genetic mutation. Our eye changes with our transmutation. So what about art? Art is boring. The artist has lost his voice. How can the painter or the sculptor battle against MTV’s audio-visual orgies, Quake’s rapid-fire perspective and the dynamic web of information on the Internet? This is the formal problem of art. In terms of its content as well, art has become meaningless. For how can an artist and an branch of art that no longer understands the language of modern times comprehend its problems and needs? - or far less comment on them?

The upshot is that traditional art has lost its role as a qualified communicator of opinion in society. But who cares? For more is more and better is better. Transformed by the new media, our new digital life is only more and better. In addition, it creates room for subjective - i.e. personal - needs and experiences. High, sacred and unassailable art - art as we knew it - no longer satisfies our new eye. Art has become a quaint curiosity, valued more or less as a craft. Not only the artist, but also the entire branch of the art world that is involved in the dissemination of art, including curators, critics, galleries and museums, is stuck in the rut of pre-digital focus on objects.

The new digital language provides us with new ways of experiencing the world. Both artists and the art milieu must take this into account. Technology - particularly the personal computer - enables us to construct “living” systems with which one is able to communicate and interact. The new, interactive art heralds a fusion of the user and the work of art. From being an onlooker, visitors to art exhibitions are now participants who are required to complete the work. The visitor becomes an artistic adventurer.

In everyday digital life, the artist needs new strategies and new tactics. Most of all, he needs more experience and opportunities. We get this by playing with the media. DETOX is both an experiment and a game. Most importantly, however, it is a necessary immersion into the opportunities created by the electronic media. This is essential in order to be able
to comment, understand and develop our contemporary culture.

Experiencing art is no longer merely a matter of observation and reflection, but is also about behaviour and interaction. The DETOX exhibition concept reflects the new aesthetic paradigm. DETOX is a digital experiential room where the audience and the works of art mutually influence one another. The works of art in this exhibition present sensitive interfaces between man and machine which cancel out the difference between artificial and natural experience.

DETOX uses computers as a basis with which to create alternative realities. This exhibition does not focus on the computer. On the contrary, it gives far greater importance to the opportunities it provides for creating experiences of an emotional and physical nature. Its works take you into a constructed experiential room characterised by ambivalence and a searching. By means of bodily extensions and staged experiences, the exhibition provides concrete experiences of the opportunities presented by the new media.

Why use the title DETOX? DETOX stems from the English word “detoxify”, meaning purification. The title hints at the exhibition’s critical look at the opportunities and problems created by today’s digital society. Our attitude to technology often appears to be natural and unproblematic. DETOX attempts to investigate the problems of modern society. Among the questions posed by DETOX are: To which extremes can we take technology? To what extreme does technology take us? What is the meaning of physicality in our digital society? What happens to the body in Cyberspace? Do machine experiences represent a replacement a placebo for a lost reality? What is it like to experience withdrawal symptoms when one is away from the electronic room? How does lust manifest itself in the digital era? What is the real reality?

The purpose of DETOX is not only to surprise, provoke and challenge, but also to give the audience experiences in the borderland between what is real and what is unreal. Production of media art remains resource-intensive. One of the aims of DETOX is to create national expertise in new media by giving the artists necessary capital and opportunities for showing their work. DETOX shall participate in defining the relationship between digital art and contemporary culture. The exhibition is an ambitious project focusing on new media with the aim of making a significant contribution to the formation of opinion.

DETOX utilises an extended concept of culture: a concept that includes a variety of media and art forms such as visual art, performance, theatre, dance and music. However, the final exhibition does not cover all aspects of the new media. Resources were just too scant for that. Nor is the exhibition a “science-fiction” project which, in technological terms, lies decades ahead of its own time. Nevertheless, it is an exhibition which would have been impossible to create even a mere five years ago. At the same time, it provides us with a taste of the forms of artistic expression we may meet in the next millennium. Particularly if one regards the real task of art as to irritate: irritation as a breach of normative patterns of perception. In such a perspective, the new enterprise of art is to really manipulate the senses.