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Contemporary Art and Politics in Exhibitions by Halil Altindere and Ei Arakawa

Abstract: The issue of contemporary art in the last three decades and the possibility of developing, acting, replicating, experimenting, storing and reactivating art through new technologies has encouraged theoreticians to re-evaluate the capabilities and capacities of the art itself. I think that only art today analyses how our reality is constructed through media channels. For the analysis, I will use the Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art 2016 “The Present in Drag”. Today we are living in a world of image implosion. Since the world is rapidly changing with techno-images and virtual space, today art generally has not to explain anything, but it can, with the help of projects and concepts, create its own world and form our presence in it. Nowadays, subjectivity has become a technical construction, and the current myth of the possibility of creating live images through technical reproduction in combination with new media has become both a theoretical and practical possibility. With this work and with several examples from contemporary art I will show that artists who deal with current political problems present the situation better than mainstream global news carriers.

Keywords: contemporary art; techno images; globalization; reproduction; art installations; internet; networking

Introduction

With this work I will attempt to demonstrate that art today actually considers the issues everyday life and points to the problems of society more precisely than any other media constructions or spectacles being advertised through global communication systems. We are witnessing the effect of the revolutionary technology of communication that constructs people’s thinking, behavior and feelings. Through new media, power strategies are expressed. Only art offers resistance to criticism and analysis of media images. As Jovan Čekić in his book *Relocation of the Horizon [Izmeštanje horizonta]* states: “Contemporary art is actually a strange historical category, its boundaries are variable, but they generally cover the range backward for twenty or thirty years,

although this boundary continues to move constantly.”¹ When we have no explanation for a new state of affairs, we have the need to refer to past experiences as we worry about the future. Fear of the unknown makes us proclaim this moment as something negative, or even as the end. It will be shown that plurality of everything is actually what we need to understand. With the help of new technologies, we become one-click participants. The artists listed below are skillfully playing with the questioning of the present with the help of digital practice. As Vilém Flusser states, today’s totalitarian machines² moved into the field of communication networks, into the field of “tribalist forms of traffic” from the telephone and the Internet, to film and television.³ In this article I will try to analyze the places where today’s machine of totalitarian regimes anchors, and through which the structure of dialogue and discourse ‘communicates’ with a lonely man who lives in fear of loneliness and, above all, a fear of death and dying. Art as a critique of these totalitarian machines that use all possible forms of media to act provides us with new ways of realizing reality.

Virtual warehouses

At the Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art 2016 “The Present in Drag”, art installations were presented digitally. The works were a mixture of artistic disciplines: video, documentary video, performances and artistic actions, drawings, photographs, objects, installations and ambiances, all of which were presented digitally without the direct presence of the artist. This Biennale was conceived so that by engaging artistically and by addressing the issues of the identity of freedom, geopolitics, gender equality and the ambivalence of technology, artists question global information systems and reflect on how far our reality is politically conceptualized.

As a medium of information flow, the Internet is material. The Internet consists of cables, computers, phones and other technical devices. When it passes through the Internet the information leaves a material trace. Computers do not forget; all deleted information can be recovered. The passage of information is backward – unlike the passing of time. “The new culture is networked and open source, and people need intelligent procedures to evaluate it.”⁴ Thus, the Internet offers collective memory. Everything on the Internet becomes generally accessible and remains, at least potentially, for an indefinite duration. Of course, keeping information about things is not the same as keeping these things. Virtual artwork warehouses are much more compact and much cheaper than traditional museums. We can also say the same for the websites of individual artists – where one can find the fullest representation of an artist’s

¹ Jovan Čekić, *Izmeštanje horizonta* (Belgrade: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015), 254.

² By ‘totalitarian machines’, I mean all the tools and capabilities of the capitalist regimes, which are placed through media practices and affect the picture of life, and control, channel and construct it.

³ Vilém Flusser, *Komunikologija* (Belgrade: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015), 33.

⁴ Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2012), 51.

work. In studio settings, artists lay a laptop on the table and present documentation of their activities. The Internet gives the author the ability to make it accessible to nearly everyone in the world. “So, it will be shown that we come to the point that the elementary unit of art is not an artwork as an object, but it is an artistic space in which the objects are exposed: the space of the exhibition, the installation.”⁵ The Berlin Biennale 2016 spelt out the opportunities and scope for intervention currently available to contemporary art and culture, and showcased the resourcefulness with which they are capable of responding to the extremes of late-capitalist modernism: the complexity of global interrelations, the rapidity of communications, the permanent overlapping of the virtual and the real, the primacy of economics, the dictates of self-optimization – the list could go on and on. The prefix with the Berlin Biennale 2016 always suggests the opposite of anything said: dis-illusion, dis-respect, dis-taste. The audience was obliged to engage with this ambivalence. Play is serious, reality is staged.

Halil Altindere

One of the installations was by artist Halil Altindere, whose work dealt with current and everyday issues concerning marginalization, repression and political resistance. By his work and approach in terms of knowledge, language skills and video framing, Altindere contributes by using his political situation as ready-made to emphasize his critical opposition to repressive regimes and the refugee crisis. He demonstrates how refugees leave the war zone in exchange for a different kind of war. The refugees leave behind the bombs and explosions, but when they enter Europe, they see how they’ve been abandoned. The spectrum of Altindere’s works ranges from the manipulation of official documents and symbols, such as passports and flags, to the creation of a music video in collaboration with a hip-hop group called Tahribad, which in its lyrics problematizes inequalities and gentrification in their Istanbul neighborhood. Can art respond to a global situation as critical and divisive and with effects so polarizing and shifting as the current migrant emergency? With a mix of realism and humor Altindere in his video *Homeland* (2016) discusses the crisis that hit Turkey and the entire world. The video was shot in Turkey and Germany and contains scenes based on real footage. On several screens in the hall he showed the same landscape with other angles of shooting, and through his own fragmentation frames pointed to the current, critical migrant problem. A problem he is very aware of since he once was a refugee himself. He shows how for the people in Syria to lose everything, their very past and history, is a human tragedy.

On one monitor was depicted the view of the sea from atop a cliff and a magnificent landscape. At the top of this hill, young women in excellent shape and expensive equipment are practicing yoga in fresh air with an impressive view. They breathe

⁵ Hans Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Estimate,” in *The Global Art World*, ed. by Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2009), 44.

deeply repetitive mantras about life. A second screen shows the same landscape and the same sea, but underneath that hill there are refugees coming from a ship, barefoot and exhausted. On the third screen, the artist shows a mix of these frames and points to the senselessness and hypocrisy of our society today. While the wealthy Western capitalist world seeks meaning in its well being, some people are labeled by the same capitalist world as undesirable, others are struggling for basic existential conditions. The skilled artist mapped the problem with just a video clip and a picture without a word. And thus, we come to the point that Hans Belting in the essay “Contemporary as an Experiment” tells us that “the art of today is not the sum of certain things but actually the topology of certain places”. So, the installation has established itself very much, so it gives us a “devourous” form of art that assimilates all other traditional art forms: paintings, drawings, photographs, texts, objects, readymades, films, sounds and videos. All these art objects were distributed in the space by artists or curators in accordance with an order that is completely individual and personal.⁶ In this way, the artist or curator has the opportunity to publicly show his private, sovereign strategy of selection. “The transition to digital and unstoppable image inflation – this mass transforms into a multitude of networked singularities in which the production and reception of images can be less and less distinguished.”⁷ As Flusser states, we are not even aware that techno-images do not require either imagination or concepts in the traditional sense, but a completely different and still unknown way of deciphering which he calls the technoimagination.⁸ Therefore, the information received from the techno-images has a special character, since techno-images may be altered in many ways. For example, the same situation can be displayed in different ways using techno-images depending on whether refugees are welcomed or not.

It would be possible to say freely that today we are living an era of imagination, in which all former *reality* is technically conceptualized to the very limit of possible experience and almost completely vanished in imaginary strange phenomena, it is transformed into an illusion as existence.⁹

But what about the Internet itself as a material object? In fact, the Internet seems to be less immeasurable than the previous carriers of communication and memory. Take traditional letters for an example. The letter can be inserted in a bottle, then into the sea or can be transported by pigeons. Although these are exceptional examples, they illustrate the distinction between traditional messaging and e-mail. The route between the sender and the recipients of the traditional letter has never been clearly

⁶ Ibid, 44.

⁷ Ibid, 259.

⁸ Flusser, *Komunikologija*, 163.

⁹ Divna Vuksanović, “Ontologija, estetika, kritika,” *ETNA* 148 (2016): 1, <http://www.aforizmi.org/etna/etna148/vuksanovic4.htm>, acc. December 3, 2017.

defined. It was a coincidence and depended on the personal decision of the carrier of the letter. These decisions could go wrong and the letter could be lost.

Compared to that, e-mails are not transmitted by individuals but fixed-path channels. The contemporary phase of globalization that relies on the Internet as the main medium seems much more vulnerable than the previous phases. Wars and disasters have destroyed many civilizations in the past, but many works of art, messages and documents survived, precisely because they remained preserved in unusual places and accidentally avoided destruction. The Earth itself is a great museum – as we can see in archaeological finds. If the Internet as a whole broke, the probability of keeping individual messages is small. And even if something was preserved, it would be difficult to understand what it is referring to. In this case, Internet equipment without information would be aesthetized. Like Roman aqueducts – without water.

Ei Arakawa – installations – collaboration. Seth Price *How to disappear in America*

In today's new regime of authorship, the artist is no longer judged on the objects he has produced but on the exhibitions and projects in which he participated. Getting to know the work of an artist today means reading his biography rather than looking at his paintings. It is assumed that his authorship is only partial.¹⁰ To get better acquainted with his work, we must look at the CD with the documented exhibitions and events in which the artist participated, but also exhibitions, events, projects and installations that were planned but never realized. It tells us that in fact an un-displayed artwork ceases to be an artwork. Instead, it becomes an artistic documentation. The question arises what would happen to the art of today after the collapse of the Internet. Would we return to the tangibility and materiality of artwork again? At the aforementioned Biennale in Berlin, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, most of the settings were completely unclear. To understand what the artist's intention was, we would have to follow a link that referred to his work and explained in detail what we saw on this setting. Namely, the artist Ei Arakawa organizes performances, installations and actions that are always associated with a particular location. His wide artistic practice includes collaborative projects with colleagues, friends as well as family members. He always questions contextual expectations and annuls the boundaries of the hierarchy between the artist's audience and performers. His latest performances often include music or in some other way integrate sound elements. For example, he converted an early work of Japanese video art into a synchronized musical. His project for the ninth Berlin Biennale continued the tradition to translate older works of his colleagues into a musical form. In this case, it was the work *How to Disappear in America* by Seth Price. In 2008 Price made a guide under that name, alluding to similar guides in the 1960s describing how to get the best out of the community's

¹⁰ Boris Groys, *From Image to Image File – and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 2008, 82–90.

mainstream. Price has been using this exciting online material to adapt to today's digital age and social control. Since the publication of Price's book, technical surveillance has become a controversial topic that throws new light on the term 'disappearance.' Arakawa's adaptation is presented in collaboration with the author Dan Poston and composer Stefan Tcheerepnin, a musical in karaoke style and an installation that shows that contextual shifts re-form old works of art and can radically expand their significance.

"Today, the artwork does not manifest art, it is only promising. Art is manifested only at the exhibition, as the Manifesto itself already speaks. In this way, the function of the museum is now similar to other archives."¹¹ The permanent exhibition of the museum is no longer, or at least not so often, presented as a permanent exhibition. So, the aforementioned setting in Berlin had about 30 artists who occupied parts of the museum with their works, videos, photographs, intended to point to the problems in the society in which we live today, but also to understand what this creative group of talented people told us we had to also examine the authors themselves after visiting the exhibition.

The current situation of the museum is that it has become a place where temporary exhibitions are displayed. As Boris Groys says, the museum collection is seen as a raw documentary material that the curator can use in combination with an exhibition program that he designed to express himself a personal attitude, a personal artistic strategy. Of course, this means that besides the curator, the artist himself also has the opportunity to form museum spaces partially or completely in accordance to his taste.

Artistic documentation collected in museums and other art institutions can always be re-articulated. This type of rediscovery of artwork is nevertheless possible only because it is still focused on multiple authorship. The old artistic documents are restored, transferred to other media, redesigned, installed and presented in other spaces, designing and documenting various projects.¹² As Groys states: "Today, the main activity of a modern man is that whenever someone wants to do something in business, politics or culture, the first thing he has to do is to create and write an appropriate project to be presented by one or more competent institutions that should approve its funding."¹³ In today's time, if an artist wants to do some work, he must be constantly concerned with the design, discussion and refusal of some new projects. After the proposal is written, estimates are written, budgets are calculated precisely, tasks are defined, committees are formed, decisions are made. In the meantime, a large number of our contemporary cultural consumers do not read anything other than these project proposals, reports and budgets. Most of them unfortunately are never realized.

Groys's starting point, that the artist as an observer has no privileged position and thus the inability to control his own work in the absence of some objective values. So, what is accepted by the audience has a certain market value. He also says that

¹¹ Ibid, 55.

¹² Ibid, 56.

¹³ Ibid, 57.

moving from a market to a non-profit milieu, social and political, in which social action and collaboration actually oppose that dependence on the audience and the imposition of the values from the outside that drag the audience into the work itself. At the same time, the position of an objective, distant, critical observer is neutralized, and the competences of the artist are expanded because he now controls the observer by introducing him into his work. It is intended to reflect Groy's interpretation that he states in his essay "multiple authorship" that if we look at artwork simply as an artwork, that would mean the misunderstanding and trivialization of its originality, its identification character, whose essence is that it is the result without results – it rather documents art than it represents.

Artistic documentation, as opposed to this, means an attempt to use artistic media in artistic spaces in order to direct itself to life, that is, to pure activity, pure practice, artistic life, as if without the desire to be presented directly. Art becomes a form of life, while the work of art becomes nonsense, mere documentation of this life-form. It could also be said that art becomes biopolitical.¹⁴

For those who prefer to create artistic documentation rather than create works of art, art is identical to life, because life is actually a pure activity that does not lead to any ultimate goal. Presenting any such final result – say in the form of an artwork – would imply the understanding of life as a mere functional process whose own duration was negated and erased by the creation of the final product, which is the equivalent of death.

As Mitchell in his essay "The work of art in the time of biocybernetic reproduction"¹⁵ states, biocybernetic reproduction replaced Walter Benjamin's technical reproduction as the fundamental idea of our age. Benjamin states that art has found its "foundation in politics"; that it has entered the space of politics at the moment when the possibilities of technical reproducibility 'seized' the art of aura – uniqueness, authenticity, unrepeatability. Benjamin considers the change of the very nature of art and the path of changing artistic functions – from the ritual role in magic and religious rituals, through the role in the "consecrated ritual" that art belongs to since the Renaissance.¹⁶ He concludes that, when art was confronted with the potentials of new technologies, technical reproducibility shifted the very limits of art, changed its character and modified its functions. Reconceptualization of art also changed its status:

¹⁴ Aleksandar Jovičević, "12. Predstavljanje nepredstavljivog: stvarni bol, patnja i smrt u umetničkim izvođenjima," virtual lecture, <http://www.uu-studije-performansa.tkh-generator.net/2010/05/26/12-predstavljanje-nepredstavljivog-stvarni-bol-patnja-i-smrt-u-umetničkim-izvođenjima/>, acc. December 3, 2017.

¹⁵ W. J. Thomas Mitchell, "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction," *Modernism/Modernity* 10, 3 (2003): 481–88.

¹⁶ Cf. Benjamin Walter, "Umetničko delo u veku svoje tehničke reprodukcije" ["The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"], in *Eseji* (Nolit: Beograd, 1974), 119.

moved from the area of self-sufficiency within which it sought for “universal truths” outside the phenomenal reality, art enters into the surrounding world, and thus changes its nature. Art is reproduced through new media, becomes available, accessible; At the same time, new media enter the space of art, becoming the very art itself.

Art observes, records the world in the state of turbulent changes, reproduces: through art (photography, film) a wider audience – many – participate in the historical process of interpreting reality – in the processes of transforming the old and creating a new world, made available and acceptable.¹⁷

As already mentioned, one insists that art has come to its end, so that its place in the history of art should take up a new field called the *field of visual studies*. It is believed that visual studies should supposedly expand the field of visual analysis: not only dealing exclusively with artistic images, but rather extending their field of research to all existing images, boldly crossing the boundaries of the old concept of art.¹⁸ Internet culture is the source of the language of new media. Given that the operational question is “What are new media?” Manovich’s position is clear, the media is essentially a “software application”.¹⁹ Or, as Flusser has hinted a long time ago²⁰, the world of texts is no longer characteristic of our codified world. Only in practical dealing with techno-images today’s operators begin to realize that new codes are at the core of the new form of dimensions, which can achieve much more.²¹

However, the real person in offline reality can use the internet not only to write novels or rules of art, but also to buy tickets, book reservation rules and run a business. All these activities take place in the same integrated Internet space and are all potentially available to other Internet users. Of course, as other individuals and organizations, authors also try to avoid total visibility by creating sophisticated coding and data protection systems.

Today’s subjectivity has become a technical construction; the contemporary subject is defined as the owner of a set of codes that only he or she knows. The contemporary subject is primarily a guarded secret. Today we meet technically guarded secrets. The Internet is a place where the subject is originally configured as a transparent subject to be watched, and then becomes technically guarded if he does not hide his secrets. However, any technical protection may be broken. Today, interpretation is the job of hackers. The modern Internet is the site of cyber wars, in which there is a secret reward. The knowledge of this secret is to control the subject in question. Cyber wars are wars of subjectivization and desubjectification, which can only happen because

¹⁷ Ibid, 132.

¹⁸ Boris Groys, *Muliple Autorship* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2008), 92–100.

¹⁹ Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2012), 158.

²⁰ Flusser, *Komunikologija*, 94.

²¹ Ibid, 94.

the Internet is the original area of transparency for each user. Under the imagination that Flusser states, he refers to the ability to encode and decode in images, and to the ability to reduce space-time relationships to a two-dimensional four-dimensional relationship, and then, on the basis of such reductions, the conclusion about the four-dimensionality to be thought of.²² Observing the media, we come to the point that they are instruments of mega corporations, behind which there is actually a closed system of ideologies. An important question is to consider how and which options we have at our disposal. But to understand how the systems work, we have to go back and recall how the ideology, the state, and the repressive apparatus that produce the system work. As Flusser alleges that the mass media is ruling our scene and that it is different from the previous scenes, it is a general place – but the general sites and banality are dangerous because they threaten to hide reality.²³

Conclusion

If technical reproducibility (photography, film and similar industrial processes, such as a factory conveyor belt) dominated by the era of modernism, biocybernetic reproduction (high-speed computing, video, digital photography, internet and industrialization of genetic engineering) dominates the era we called contemporaneity. What matters is the fact that, even if the media that artists work, ways of distribution and exposure have changed, art continues to better examine the political aspects of our lives than the mainstream media. What is definitely a problem is the fact that artistic space is visited by a certain audience. The fate of art is still in the hands of the audience. The problem of the audience or the participant requires new research. The two case studies elaborated in this article show that there are still artists dealing with specific political topics and concretizing them through their work and engagement. Whether this will reach the cheer of the audience is debatable since as we stated the audience is blinded by the implosion of techno-images that are served by mainstream global media that are always in the service of capitalist machines. Perhaps, as Flusser states, we are looking for a new kind of meaning, because we have lost faith in inherited meanings and in the conventions behind our linear codified world. Techno-images should give new meaning to the texts.²⁴

As Jovan Čekić points out, the key is in the relocation when analyzing images, in order to view them from different perspectives and not to accept the banality of images that function as information and block every thought.²⁵ In art, the experiment does not insist on truth or repeatability, but on the continuing excitement of the moment of resistance to the banal dominance of the capitalist machine.

²² Ibid, 198.

²³ Ibid, 236.

²⁴ Ibid, 90.

²⁵ Cf. Čekić, *Izmeštanje horizonta*, 266.

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Article received: March 24, 2018

Article accepted: April 10, 2018

Preliminary report – Short Communications