

Project – Theoretical Conception

“Critique of Pure Image – Between Fake and Quotation”

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Background

In its definition of notions, the project makes use of the term of “technics” introduced by Lewis Mumford in “Technics and Civilization” in place of the universally accepted “technologies”, when it comes to the primary terminological framework defining artistic events closely linked to digital and communicational technics and their use in an artistic process and language. In line with these thoughts we will refrain from using such terms as “creative”, “innovative”, “new”, etc., as terms defining the structure, aims and methods of this project. If their use should be unavoidable, we propose to open them to close scrutiny and to make sense of them not only in their contemporary context but also as part of a historical approach and methodological process, which has started substantially before the appearance of digital and communicational technics.

The history of human civilization is also the history of technics. Even with the first instrument used by prehistorical man, technics are entangled in a complex structure of mutually linked and dependent components making up human societies, such as myth, power, gender, energy, struggles. Based on critical theoretical analysis of the discourse on technical progress Lewis Mumford proposes a fundamental structure of the development of society – social life, art, science, theory.

The industrialization is also the history of capitalism. The dominating role of technics in an ever-spreading world leads to an existence in fragments, defining the working space, occupying everyday life and the “normal” places of everyday life. By creating certain habits, technics modify the structure of society, human habits, human consciousness and human anatomy.

The sources and references of this discussion are obviously much older than the digital technics themselves and their use as means for artistic goals.

A brief sketch of a history of art from the point of view of technics

The artist elite has always managed to make use of the technics and instruments of technical progress. The creative artist of the bronze era discovers the technics of metal foundries, under the propelling forces of a monotheistic society rationalizing itself that had just discovered morals and justice. From then on, in an unending revolution of technical progress, the progressive technics in art have derived from this thrust forward – along with the discourse of innovation and new technics.

With industrialization and World War I, the era of machines, the new avant-garde – the dadaists and surrealists – discover the force of moving pictures, photography, mechanized clichés, and the conceptual though still rather aestheticized use of the mass media for artistic purposes, starting with mechanically separate newspaper snippets – along with all this, a new active social role for the public in the artistic process is expected and imposed. Subsequently, art would get a hold of concrete, of plastics, of silicon, of plastic surgery. 1980ies – with the imposition at lightning speed of communication and computer technics and under the pressure of the social, economical and political conditions a paradigm in art took the previous paradigm’s place. Not only the status quo of the object in art is lost, but also that of the image. Thus the archetype of the contemporary artist changed, giving rise to a different picture of the arguments and context of their own art.

The contemporary digital artist expertly rides the wave of the newest technical applications, information, code, or biotechnologies. The instruments, as much as they may have changed, form the ideology of technical progress, fashioning a common global landscape of social, economical and cultural evolution of society. “Using software as an artistic material” or “modifying and redesigning of products is a cultural practice in digital age.” Even actual networks, communities, social relations, or the models of DNA can be used as instruments for artistic purposes.

Why critique?

As a consequence of globalization, the appearance of digital technics, and <Documenta X> 1998 in Kassel, the arts officially announced their new object to be “Politics/Poetics.” Once more art is called upon to fulfill a historical function in society, related to the idea not only of technical, but also of general human progress. Between document and social intervention, the dialectic of art links in with an interdisciplinary approach that is new for its nature, with

the argument that it presents distinctly more democratic forms of expression in public space. In this context, which had started out as an alternative to existing artistic norms, the contemporary artistic institutions all too quickly found its bearings and adapted, appropriated and “canonized” it, reforming themselves in the process.

Changing its motives, goals, instruments, contemporary art demands of its audience adequate knowledge, competence, readiness to communicate, to be informed, yes even technical skills in order to find the key to the perception and interpretation of the artist’s work. Is it required of the visitors and fans of artistic events to professionalize themselves of sorts under this pressure, if they do not wish to drop out of the process of representation and perception? Is it possible via the new technics to elaborate strategies by which art may avoid falling into the trap of leaving the despised discourse of art for art’s sake just to embrace that of art by experts for experts?

If contemporary media art practices constitute democratic, accessible forms and correspondingly techniques of expression in art (as some experts claim), what are the social implications of the processes in contemporary art, and how can the notion of high-low be interpreted in this context? This discussion takes place on the backdrop of the moral-ethical question about access to technics, as well as the social and geographical contradictions and division of labor relative to their production and use.

The critical reflections on this process dynamically change the terminology of art. It is not only the system of concepts that changes, but the very object of art, pertaining to a decidedly European, humanist tradition in art – life, or nature. With the emergence of digital technics in art, contrary to the initial expectation that virtual cyberworlds would be created, it turned out that the interest was rather directed towards more nature. Towards even more genuineness and authenticity. In the current period, the object of art is defined as “new realism” (Flash Art and other magazines defining the newest tendencies in contemporary art), “aesthetics of collaboration” or outright “New Gravity” (freshly picked from the site of the Moscow Biennale 2005 – coming up). This changes not only the design of the urban space, but fundamentally the concepts related to this notion. The desert becomes more desert, the village more rural, the mountain more mountainous, the wrestlers more wrestly, and the poor become aestheticizedly poor. How does such a context bear on the perception of the global and the local?

And this is where the need for critique arises. We suggest, after the arguments of Kant, and after him Foucault, to use our reason in debating the idea of human progress in contemporary media art:

“Kant in fact describes Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority; now it is precisely at this moment that the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped. Illegitimate uses of reason are what give rise to dogmatism and heteronomy, along with illusion; on the other hand, it is when the legitimate use of reason has been clearly defined in its principles that its autonomy can be assured.” – Michel Foucault, *What Is Enlightenment?*

We propose to use the term “critique” in the historical sense of the critical method used by Kant in order to establish the principles of metaphysical knowledge of the nature of the human being, in which it is not our knowledge that conforms to the things, but they conform to it.

The Function of the Quotation

“It was during the 18th century. An illusionist who was very erudite in the field of clockwork mechanisms created a robot. This robot was so perfect, his movements so supple and natural, that when the illusionist and his creature came out on the stage together, the spectators would be unable to distinguish who is the man and who is the robot. Then the illusionist found he had no choice but to mechanize his own gestures and, as the culmination of his art, somewhat to deteriorate his own appearance in order to give the show a sense, given that the spectators were very frightened at the fact that in the course of the show they could not understand who is the ‘real one.’ It was even better if they took the man for a machine, and the machine for a man.” – Parable, retold by Baudrillard in: *The System of Things* (1968).

The French movie director Jacques Tati proposes us a fragmented new picture of the world, constructed of chunks of fake nature, mechanized parts and fashion attributes of which the new urban spaces are formed. In this process the function of language as an act of speech is of no importance – a society in which communication is reduced to the sign or signal. Tati’s mechanized human beings, alienated, emulate the machines’ movements, while the machines become more human and talkatively associate with each other, such that at one point we indeed lose our ability to discern nature, or the human body, from the technicized world of the machines and the synthetic surfaces of the new materials.

In “2001: A Space Odyssey,” the cult movie by Stanley Kubrick that defined the taste of an entire generation of designers, artists and thinkers, the main computer of the spaceship traveling to Jupiter on a special mission, HAL, is faced with a situation that has not been foreseen when he was programmed: contradictory instructions. His task of fulfilling his secret mission collides with his main purpose of keeping the crew alive. Under the pressure of this contradiction, the machine can survive only if from rational it degenerates to emotional. In other words, HAL acquires human traits.

The Image

We live in a world in which technics play an ever more dominating and defining role. Contemporary society has grown together with the technics to the extent that they model our desires, habits, ideas, goals, where the key idea turns out to be the functionality of the object. A power system of objects.

At the same time the new technics turn out to be more instruments than their mechanical predecessors. They pave the way for systematizing, catalogizing, classifying in distinct folders or headings, and impose the idea of a world in which the “image” becomes more meaningful than the object itself.

The personalized choice of the advertising strategies, riding on the ideology of advertising and mass media, leaves us with the freedom to consume. A slogan from an advertising for disposable bikinis, presented in the Bulgarian media, invokes instantaneous and immediate consumption: “Wear, tear, throw away” – cheap and convenient.

Every one has the right to realize themselves based on their consumption. How does the notion of community change as a result of this irradiation? How are the links and relations in the community built on top of consumption, buying and using? Is not cultural identity in contemporary society rather a question of image, marketing strategy and purchasing power?

Fake

In terms of the status of the use of the term “fake,” it is necessary to agree on a few points, drawing on theoretical sources having explored its archeology and anthropology.

The first is, that we are looking for the projection of the real “fake.” Because the debate around the original and the copy has lost its sense outside the circles of the old-fashioned elite, of private collectors of objects and museum experts, or functionaries of the offices for the control of trademarks.

Fake is one of the oldest narratives, an inner problem in art in terms of idea, techniques and expression. Perspective, to take one example, has been developed as a system by which the illusion of spatial dimension is created on a two-dimensional surface. The technics before the industrial revolution work with the three dimensions place, nature and human being. As explains Lewis Mumford, the mechanized systems introduce real time as a fourth dimension into the equation.

Old masters, new masters, clichés, mechanical matrices, Andy Warhol, Elvis Presley, political campaigns, preservatives and coloring for fast food, which help it become healthy, palatable and authentic in appearance. The model fakes in the biotechnics debate around the authenticity of the visual simulations of the DNA links with their excessive aestheticism, or the artificial nature of the computer-based animated presentations of microelements in human biology and physiology, of online games, of reality TV programs like the hugely popular show “Big Brother.”

“Fake pictures are part of the history of photography, going back to the early days of the medium. Elements of the image were retouched out of the image at will or added into it. Stalin used retouching for his political propaganda. Attempted manipulation of this kind seems positively dilettante in the light of modern digital image editing, which adds a completely new dimension to the possibilities of altering reality, and of using simulation and fiction.”

– Rudolf Scheutle, “Kathrin Günther,” in: Moving Pictures – Photography and Film in Contemporary Art (2001), p. 63.

In his essay “Travels in hyperreality,” Umberto Eco explains how his trip through America is a “pilgrimage in search of ‘hyperreality,’ or the world of ‘the Absolute Fake,’ in which imitations don’t merely reproduce reality, but try improve on it.

Not unexpectedly, it leads him to the ‘absolutely fake cities,’ Disneyland and Disney World, with their re-created main streets, imitation castles and lifelike, animatronic robots.” – as paraphrased by Ken Sanes.

And: “Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can.”

Over the past years, commercial cinema has seen an outright boom of movies like “The Truman Show,” “The Matrix,” “Goodbye Lenin,” which make a direct link with the topic. Can it be that the reason for this interest of the spectators is explained by the argument that society is becoming more and more sensitive to anti-utopian sagas, and does indeed care about the debate on the original and the copy.

As an opposite tendency, nowadays on the market the scheme for fast and immediate success refers us directly to the formula dominated by the real “Fake.” The mass media and pop culture, it turns out, are quick at finding their way and satisfy the collective needs of the market and the taste of the audience.

MTV is mixing its programs, balancing between advertising, musical clips and the new realism of a television made by spectators for spectators.

A new picture of the development of contemporary culture and correspondingly contemporary art, where critical reflections and social implications are based on the strong desire for a new realism, resting on the arguments for an immediate consumption, where along with the wars, natural disasters are consumed, and any other incident is welcome.

“People want to hear about real people living real lives in real places.”

– David Boyle, *Authenticity – Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (2003), p. 274.