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**Our Memory of Fin de Siècle and Contemporary Art and
Ideologies**

The impulse for my short paper was provided by my first impressions on reading the brochure of this congress. I was immediately struck by the technical emphasis of the theme, **What Memories for Contemporary Art**. My approach is based on the critique of ideology, not that of a specialist in computer science - such knowledge I simply do not have. Hopefully my questions will make some contribution to our discussion.

First a brief description of the current Zeitgeist and then to the point.

Contemporary culture is characterized by fading utopias. Many of the great social visions of the early years of the century turned into totalitarianism, then collapsed. The consequences of technical progress have proved more problematic than expected. Pollution and mass unemployment are a part of the high price we have to pay for our way of life. New diseases have eroded our faith in the natural sciences, and we have been forced to adjust the moral attitudes once considered emancipatory in a more traditional direction. Our expectations for the mission of art have also become more modest and restricted than earlier. We have deconstructed its language, and believe we can handle its ideologies and strategies. Our dreams on the threshold of the new millennium are not - to apply Hegel's distinction - heroic, but rather prosaic. Will we be satisfied with our reasonable wishes for a bourgeois family life, economic security and democracy? Does feminist criticism perhaps show the way to liberated future? Or would elegance and reflected inwardness, as in the art of Ross Bleckner and Robert Mapplethorpe, offer us a more attractive approach?

The issue of contemporary art and memory is an urgent one, especially in the light of information technology, in today's art discourse. In the final analysis, is new technology the emancipatory force we can put our faith in, the force that will show the way to the next millennium? Without a doubt, automatic data processing has opened up new possibilities for controlling large quantities of information. Tremendous advances have been made as to speed and quantity. Presumably the new technology still conceals a great many innovative dimensions, which have only just begun to be applied - one such dimension is the idea of a new geographic cultural structure.

But what is memory? After all, technical and quantitative aspects are probably not its most important elements. Remembering is more of a constructive and qualitative process; it is largely interpretation and understanding. To remember contemporary art or, if you like, the memory of contemporary art - aside from databases and documentation - means an awareness of values, society and history, a consciousness of the choices open to us. This means the bold attempts made to interpret and read contemporary art in the context of our entire culture.

The technical approach (of the organisers of this congress) to studying memory in contemporary art cannot but arouse questions. It almost encourages an attempt at interpretation and historical analogy. The dialectic of Vitalism and Decadence has been one of the crucial tensions of this century. A hundred years ago philosophers, aestheticians and architects raised the achievements of the engineering sciences against the mental fatigue and apathy of the fin de siècle, against the dying nostalgia for inwardness of late Romanticism and Symbolism. The new winds were represented, for example, by Jean Marie Guyau in France, Frank Lloyd Wright in the USA, Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos in Austria, Sigurd Frosterus in Finland and, somewhat later, the

Futurists in Italy. Henri Bergson's *élan vital* was thought to achieve its most passionate expression in the rhythm of machine culture.

Vitalistic vigour has been a dominant mental and practical attitude since the beginning of the century, achieving signal successes in science, technology and economics, while also acting as a force of destruction and repression in wars and totalitarian societies. The Decadent tradition has been relegated rather to the role of an outsider and a questioner.

Today it would be difficult to deny the justification of and need for the Vitalistic criticism of the turn of the century. The achievements of modern technology have radically shaped our society, culture and arts. Technology has been the driving force of the Modern.

But is technology always such a talisman? Even if technological Vitalism pointed the way out of the intellectual depression of the *fin de siècle*, can it automatically rouse us from our present apathy, too? Maybe, but I am skeptical. Contemporary techno-culture - unlike that of the turn of the century - very often appears to be a surrogate activity. Without denying its hard core as an extension of our mental and intellectual abilities, contemporary techno-culture is in part a form of virtual play into which we escape and which skirts the more substantial questions. We have all heard the gospel of the disciples of the Internet, read about satellite seminars and immaterial architecture produced by electronic media. Substance, content and functionality based on concrete needs seldom come up in these talks.

Alarmingly, this tendency is not alien to the design of new art museums, an aspect which closely concerns us as art critics. For example, the latest projects by the Japanese architect Toyo Ito and the German Daniel Libeskind pay very

little attention to the needs of displaying contemporary art. Instead, abstract mathematical and purely sculptural ideas have become leading and independent factors in planning. An art museum as a technological sculpture could be a serious fallacy. The German aesthetician Wolfgang Iser recently encouraged architects to study the questions of materiality and tactility rather than immateriality. By the same token, in issues of memory and contemporary art, we should avoid concentrating on tools, and seriously focus instead on questions of interpretation and criticism.