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Ontological Transgressions: Art Between the Real and the Virtual

The dynamic development of communication technologies, gradual appearance of newer and newer media and their wide and popular usage have generally changed our experience and our lives, they have reshaped our civilisation and totally transformed the culture. The above processes have been especially impetuous in the second part of the century along with the developing excellence of data techniques. Today, at the dawn of the new century, and the new millennium, we live in the world that has been completely transformed.

The media reality has been shaped in result of the development of communication technologies. In consequence, fringe areas – the meeting places of media worlds and reality have appeared, where they interact and intermingle. The borderline between the two currently basic spheres of life – the virtual reality of the media and the reality of the real world – became an example and a model for all the other borders, which have appeared as a result of the media activity or have been transformed by the media. The border is no longer characterised by permanence, it is to the same extent spatial as temporal, it is a process, where the permanent exchange of quality, shift of position of values and senses take place. In fact, the border may be also defined as extra-spatial and extra-temporal since being a mental phenomenon it does not have these measurements but it does refer to them. Because of its mental character, the border is an elusive border in progress, a particular nomadic phenomenon, which advances permanently with us, it is transformed continuously in time and space, and thus it accompanies us wherever we go. It is an environment of post-modern existence, it is our world *in statu nascendi*.

The omnipresence of the border defined as above is a reason for our life to take place in inter-spaces and inter-times, in the hybrid world "in-between". It is no longer marked between different civilisations, and cultures, but between reality and virtual reality as well. This may be perceived as a new foundation for the versatility of shapes of the world, which one cannot escape, and as one of the sources of pluralism and the source of continually undertaken ontological transgressions. Along with Jean Baudrillard one can claim that it is a beginning of homogenisation process. He states that the more frequently we remain in both universes simultaneously, the more they mix and we lose the possibility to differentiate

between them. In the latter perspective the real and the virtual join to form new phenomena, described as simulacra. The adherents of this concept believe that simulacra do not allow for differentiation between the virtual and the real forms.

Between the two approaches described above I am closer in my belief to the former, which depicts the world as a versatile entity. Moreover, it seems more apt and successful in describing the complex nature of contemporary culture, and thus more effective for the analysis of recent art.¹ Besides, the dynamic and flowing nature of the borders of reality described in such a way suggest the borders should have been perceived more as a reference system and bilateral relationships than as a traditional stabile frames. Presently the borders between the two spheres of reality do not separate them but they link one to the other. I will refer back to that characteristic of the border in the latter part of that paper when I will examine some examples of art works. Wolfgang Welsch has noticed that the dynamics and intensity of the relations between the reality and media worlds have been shaping these interacting areas. On the one hand it leads to virtualisation or de-realisation of the real (and of our perception of the real), and on the other, it leads to the fact that we estimate highly the non-electronic experience of the reality. The side-effect of the above processes, except for multiplication and versatility of the experienced worlds, is to show that every reality is basically constructed.

Looking from another perspective one can see that the development of the media had led to the transformation and expansion of the technosphere. At first it was seen and understood as opposing the biosphere. At present, when the birth of the post-biological world had been proclaimed, it is rather clear that the border between the two is as blurred as the virtual and the real reality of the media. Both domains have joined together to form bio-techno-sphere, making their relationships one of their internal characteristic and adding dynamism to their borders.

The changes strike the human psychic and identity as well, which in result becomes an open entity, resembling a dynamic process, which transforms the relationships between the body and the psyche, the reality of the body and the virtual reality of the imagination. New technologies become the extensions of the human body and therefore influence the identity. The body itself, its definition, its history, its matter and gender also undergo various transformations, which has visible impact on the way the identity is perceived.

¹ One should not however discard the eliminated theory completely. While it is of little use at complex analysis of contemporary art culture, it may be very helpful for the interpretation of individual works, the issues addressed and their formal conditioning.

The new civilisational situation and the widened and transformed environment of a human being, where the biosphere complemented by the technosphere forms a biotechnological syndrome, they all influence the contemporary culture. They add a number of elements, which together form a system called cyberculture.

In the appearing cyberculture (multi)media paradigm the border relations between material and virtual aspect of culture products seem to be of prime importance. Contemporary art works making use of media technologies, and most importantly installations, show various types of relationships between the material and the virtual. These relationships form a paradigm of co-presence which takes place either through conflicting stresses or through balanced dialogue. Both meeting dimensions become reality in different forms. Versatility of appearance of the material is accompanied by the versatility of forms of the virtual. Both spheres intermingle in a dynamic relationship, which is a process of searching of the balance. From time to time, one or the other dimension gains temporal supremacy of the whole, but continuously each temporary state is followed by the next one, and is melted in the flow of the permanent transformations. The search for that temporary and unsteady balance is at present the main area and objective of art experiments.

As I have noted before, the play between the material and the virtual of a work of art (and art per se) is very productive in the (multi)media installations created nowadays by a number of artists. It is very often thanks to a new status of the recipient, who quite frequently becomes an element of the installation structure. The recipient thus not only enriches the whole dynamic organisation of the work of art, but s/he enriches her/his perception as well. Those installations sometimes give birth to specific forms of autotelic (audio)visual narration, through which the work reveals its link to both spheres of life, its "in-betweenness". Being seemingly confined only and exclusively in the virtual space, the narration reveals its dependence from the material, the physical part of the work and a careful observer will mark its true character: the fact that it is stretched between the two spheres. The work as a whole, in its two-dimensionality becomes then a discourse revealing (disclosing) at the same time the materiality of the virtual worlds and the "virtuality" of the matter.

A perfect example of that kind is a Dalibor Martinis' installation entitled *Circles Between Surfaces*. The work in the classic way for all media installations resulting from the ontological and structural characteristic places the recipient between the two analysed spheres.

The real world is here represented by the element of water. It was confronted with the virtuality of projection. Water fills a metal object, a sculpture in the shape of a well. A video-projector is placed between the two bottoms of the well. The light emitted by the projector through a glass round window in the bottom of the sculpture emits through the water and gets to the ceiling of the room.

A projected image also shows water. In the picture, subsequent divers try to recount with the gestures the Buddhist *koan* to us, they give up, swim away and return again and again. Except for the sculpture containing water and the video projection, an invisible pipe taking water to the ceiling comprises the installation. The pipe is hidden so that we are made to believe that water drops from the image. Drops falling on the water surface in the "well" make circles, which are then transferred with the light of the projection to the image on the ceiling. In such a way, not only is a vision of a perfect harmony between the real and the virtual created, but there are close and bi-lateral relations of interaction between them opened as well. That is how Martinis' work directs our attention towards the metamorphoses of our experience, towards the bi-lateral dependencies and the interactions between the reality and the virtual reality.

The opposition between the two realities, the real and the virtual, is represented in the best manner in the interactive art. It is because the general structure of the interactive work of art is based on the analogous opposition between the real and the virtual. A similar scheme appeared earlier in the conceptual art, in the opposition of the material art object and the semantic object, which therefore can be hailed as the movement opening the process leading to hypermedia art. Interactive multimedia installations allow the interacting recipient through the interface for initiating and travelling between the reality of the art object and the virtual of the work of art, i.e. the product of the interaction. That is how the whole scheme or the area of the interactive communication becomes the space and time of bi-lateral intermix and transformation of the two spheres of reality.

An interesting example of that real and virtual processes is Agnes Hegeds' *Handsight*. This work is experienced as an interaction process linking two dimensions of reality. Manipulating by the interface in the shape of an eye-ball the interacting person gets the insight into the virtual universe, provided by the video projection. We can influence the projection through the interface, however we have to obey the rules valid in the virtual world (extra-human perspective).

Hegeds installation points to the various aspects of *translocation*. First of all, because it addresses the issue of relationship between the reality and the virtual reality and the possibilities of contact between them and their bi-lateral interaction.

Secondly, it draws attention to the problem of telepresence, of the moving of senses in space. Thirdly, it transforms and exchanges the function of perception organs, as it transfers the rule of one of the senses (the sight) under control of the other (the touch). The latter aspect reveals a new dimension of being in-between, which appeared from experiencing the border between the virtual and the real, namely being between the senses, between the optic and the tactile.

The experience of being in-between gains specific characteristic in case of art applying virtual reality technology. Agnes Hegeds piece is a prologue for art works of this kind. In such a case the human body is a part of a work of art, or it plays the role of the interface, and the border dividing the real and the virtual world runs through it.

Complexity of artistic relations between the real and the virtual is even larger due to the works based in the Internet. Communication with digital creatures, often characterised by the qualities of intelligent or/and living significantly adds to our ontological and transgression experiences and opens up new forms of relationships between the reality and the virtual.

To sum up one should repeat that the above arguments and the examples quoted make us believe that the borders between the domains of reality and culture, which had been clearly separated before are currently being questioned, destroyed and shifted mainly through media and multimedia and thus they were transformed into a scheme of relationships and inter-relations, into a hybrid inter-space, in the world in-between. Contemporary interactive art has become an exceptionally interesting form of these transformations. It is dominated by the issues of bilateral influences, influxes and transformations. In all these spheres problems of references between the real and the virtual, leading to the conclusion of a constructed nature of each reality, seem of foremost importance.