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LOST IN SPACE

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THE SPACING OF “BODY” AND “LANGUAGE” THROUGHOUT AND BEYOND NEW MEDIA

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The following thoughts derive from the introduction to a section at the annual conference of the College Art Association held on February 24th, 2000, in New York City. Together with Ursula Frohne (ZKM | Karlsruhe, Center for Art and Media) I co-chaired this panel under the title “Crossing Boundaries in Cyberspace? The Politics of ‘Body’ and ‘Language’ after the Emergence of New Media”. The three speakers, and the discussant Catherine Bernard (Southampton College) engaged in a lively debate after their presentations, which helped us all to reconsider the topic from different points of view. This text owes a lot to the fruitful discussion in which the audience also played an active role. As a first and general introduction, it investigates the key concepts of “body” and “language” before a media theoretical and postcolonial background. Ursula Frohne’s further introductory remarks were more specified on the electronic media. The first paper under the title “*Oculus: GPS (Ground Positioning System), Ritual, Body, Time, Space, and Consciousness*,” was given by Lynn Tjernan Luktas (University of Minnesota). The second speaker was Brooke Knight (University of Maine) on *Watch me! Web Cams and the Public Exposure of Private Lives*, followed by Jim Costanzo (Pratt Institute), who was presenting REPOhistory’s web site

under the title *On-Line & in the Streets: "Circulation", A Site-Specific Public Art Work and Dedicated Interactive Website*.

The session was designed for theorists and artists who are engaged in the critical examination of historical and current implications of "media". It investigated the changing notions of "body" and "language" under the impact of new technologies. (Art) Historically "body" and "language" gained new significance with the emergence of action, performance, and concept art. Retrospectively, they can be considered preliminary impulses for the introduction of "new media", such as video, interactive installations, Internet, and virtual reality. We can gain a lot from this critical investigation to understand the re-structuring of "space" in and throughout the new media. Although "body" and "language" are rarely considered primary media themselves, they continue to be major issues in today's representations of "media art": The "body" functioning as a virtual projection screen for the, however, mostly utopian promises of cyberspace, and "language" as embodiment of unlimited communication in the global community. In reflection on this historical background, the following questions were leading the discussion: Which notion of "media" does contemporary art and cultural practice imply? Can we come up with a critical concept of media neither presupposing nor excluding the categories of "body" and "language"? How will the juxtaposition of the global versus the local redefine the political sphere? Further queries about the cultural consequences of "new media politics" came to mind: How are art, life, and the public and private spheres junctured in the cultural discourse? Is the rhetoric of an evolutionary gain through a "technology of worldwide inclusion" symptomatic of increasingly rigid border politics, hovering behind the compensatory vision of a unified "mediated" society?

4. *The Space of the Arts / Spațiul artelor*

In a double approach, this session focussed, on the one hand on the historical formation of a media concept in art and culture, and, on the other, on the actual practices and strategies of these media as devices. With a historical perspective on media art, the discussion of contemporary artists' approaches led us to a critical investigation of today's media practice.

In her essay on "Postcolonial Media Theory" María Fernández states that:

in conjunction with recent debates around topics such as multiculturalism, colonialism, the 1992 quincentenary, identity politics, and whiteness studies [it becomes] ever more striking that postcolonial studies and electronic media theory have developed parallel to one another but with very few points of intersection. To be sure, the two fields have had opposing goals. Postcolonial studies has been concerned primarily with European imperialism and its effects: the construction of European master discourses, resistance, identity, representation, agency, gender, and migration, among other issues. By contrast, in the 1980s and early 1990s electronic media theory was primarily concerned with establishing the electronic as a valid and even dominant field of practice. Many theorists were knowingly or unknowingly doing public relations work for digital corporations. This often involved representing electronic technologies, especially the computer, as either value-free or inherently liberatory.¹

Considering how the electronic media rearranged our ways of dealing with communication, space and the crossing of

¹ "Postcolonial Media Theory", in: *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Fall 1999, p. 59 (this essay is an extended reprint from the journal *Third Text*, No. 47, Summer 1999).

boundaries in the broadest sense we cannot leave out the political implications of these practices. It is not enough to analyze only the electronic conditions of these developments. We have to go back to reconsider some basic pre-conditions that are structurally involved in electronic media use. “Body” and “language” are not only pertinent, and perhaps even obsessive topics in media art and electronic culture, but they are also always involved in its practices. These two concepts do not already cover the whole field of pre-conditions. Together with the political aspects of “crossing boundaries in cyberspace”, they nevertheless mark a central position in the electronic realm. I want to re-articulate briefly some general relations between the key terms that appeared on our panel.

To densely structure communication, interaction, and space in social, economical, gendered, political, cultural, etc. categories is one of the major features of urban and architectural design — as well as of telecommunication. After the latest “media revolution”, however, the function of our inhabited spaces and any sorts of national, cultural, political borders has been transformed widely and wildly. These transformations contribute to the fact that social space — public and private — is never only structured after the model of an empty container, but instead like a multiple field of discourses. Power, history, politics, etc. are first “practical interpretations” of these discursive structures which themselves try to act and react in this play. Communication and mobility are further basic and permanent inscriptions in these fields. Any crossings of borders or distinctions, any communicative act or on-line-business may change the structure of the field without being able to fully control it. Before and beyond looking at technical features of media and communication the political roles and effects of “body” and “language” in social and

cultural spaces as well as in the art world have to be taken into account. “Net_Condition” the largest, and up to date most ambitious exhibition project about art and practice of the so-called Internet with simultaneous venues in Karlsruhe (Germany), Graz (Austria), Barcelona (Spain), and Tokyo (Japan) closed its doors around the very time of the CAA conference. Although Peter Weibel, the leading force behind this huge project, pleads for “open practices” with “dematerializing tendencies”² instead of reinforcing, however, “aesthetical things,” and “institutions” concerned with them, we have to admit that the very success of a project like this will have inevitably “institutionalizing effects” and will press the former “openness” into a certain definition that is bound to the success it came from and by which it was created. Media/art awards and other canon creating forces are the apparent sign for that. Media art seems to experience on a different level a similar dialectics like that of the classical avant-garde that tried — however unsuccessfully — to escape from the narrow field of the art world into “real life.” Here we could ask about the specific “reality” of art, and language as well as about the “reality” of media or architecture, last, but not least about the ‘medial’ aspects of architecture and urban design.³

² A catalogue book on the project will appear this year by MIT Press.

³ For the complicated relations between media, architecture and art, cf. “Architekturmetaphern zwischen <Kontextkunst> und <offenen Handlungsfeldern>: Ein Interview mit Peter Weibel von Christian Katti”, in: (cat.) *Escape_space: Raumkonzepte mit Fotografien, Zeichnungen, Modellen und Video*, eds. Ursula Frohne & Christian Katti, Ursula-Blickle-Stiftung 2000, pp. 24 - 27. See also: *Virtual Cities: Die Neuerfindung der Stadt im Zeitalter der globalen Vernetzung*, eds. Christa Maar & Florian Rötzer, Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1997. *Connected Cities: Kunstprozesse im urbanen Netz / Connected Cities: Processes of Art in the Urban Network*, Stuttgart: Hatje-Cantz, 1999.

“I certainly never shall advise you to follow the bizarre thinking that arose here, and to dream of a universal language.”⁴ With this epitaph, taken from Francesco Soave, Umberto Eco opens his incredibly learned story of the search for a “perfect language” in European history. New York — where the conference took place — is not in Europe, and nobody believes in the project of a “perfect language” anymore. From a perspective of the history of ideas, such a project could be called outdated in all its philosophical, utopian, and mystical aspects. In spite of a universal language, we seem to believe in difference, in differences of any kind. When we agree upon that, then the newly risen and still rising beliefs in a “universal medium”, a perfect medium for everything and everybody must produce more of an uncanny feeling. If we read closely and take cultural, historical, political, utopian and even mystical frames (which may be called “new age” in our times) into account, the resemblance between an outdated “search for a perfect language” and the up to date believe in a “perfect medium” are striking.

Rising questions of and about identity (consciousness, self, subject, etc.) can be addressed in the methodological frame of the most common means of understanding and communication, which still is language. Although the study of culture tends to shift from text-based descriptions to such, centered on performative paradigms. The differences between language and media are subtle and hard to grasp. Philosophically it might even be suitable to ask whether

⁴ Francesco Soave, *Riflessioni intorno all' istituzione di una lingua universale*, 1774. Quoted as epitaph by Umberto Eco in: *Die Suche nach der vollkommenen Sprache*, München: Beck, 1994, p. 11, the emphasis added.

language is a medium at all. I will stretch out a short definition of language by David E. Cooper⁵ and I suggest to have in mind and even substitute the term “medium” [like it is done in brackets] every time when the term “language” is used by Cooper. This will “do” something to his definition and opens a perspective on the tension between the two terms: The understanding

of language [media] is the attempt, primarily, to provide an integrated and illuminating general account of the relation between language and speakers [media and media users], and language and the world [media and the world]. A language [medium], after all, is both used *by* and *between* people, and *about* the world. In the one area belong such various issues as the innateness of linguistic knowledge alleged by Chomsky [there is certainly no such thing as an innate medium, but we have to ask about the medial conditions and preconditions of the body], and the proper taxonomy of the speech act whereby we “do things with words”. In the second belong issues like the parallelism (or lack of it) between structures of language and reality [structures of media and reality], and the nature of referential expressions. The two areas come together in the theory of meaning [and here we could perhaps even say theory of culture]. No account of meaning can be adequate which does not explain both how people understand words and how words relate to the world [how we use media and how media relate to the world].⁶

To separate a concept of world from language seems theoretically possible at first sight although the emanating

⁵ Cf. *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Payne, Oxford, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996, p. 291.

⁶ *Ibid.*

problems of referentiality (language to world, language to language) are as pertinent as the incredible shrinking features of a world without any semiotic spheres that hardly could be called a world anymore. Language seems to belong to the world as much as it transcends it into the different perspectives that occur from the broad variations and differences between various and dissimilar languages, cultures, value systems, and in the end, different worlds that are part of our globe. Instead of a dualism between world and language (these Cartesian dualisms are deeply rooted in Western culture with its doublings between body and soul — the latter structured like a language according to J. Lacan —, nature and culture, form and content, etc.) media are always materialized and thereby they are part of the world. And they are bound to certain practices which themselves are embedded in cultural features and in political effects and consequences. Examining the complicated and newly developing “world of electronic media” confronts us with an uncanny revival of many of those dualisms and inherent problems, which are encountered in the twofold obsession of these new media with “body” and “language”.

The body is mediated. It is mediated in culture and it is mediated in itself. It is represented in the brain which itself is a part of the body; and it is mediated with the help of the brain through the senses that are functions of the body in which the various inscriptions of culture are already at work. The body is mediated in itself although we do not take it as a specific medium — nevertheless it may be “foundational of all symbolisms”.⁷

⁷ Brooks, 1993, p. 7, quoted from: M. Payne’s article on “body,” in: *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Language is always materialized and in the end may become embodied, whether this body is described as subject, self, writing, or otherwise. Voice is for instance a bodily resonance of language (technically amplified on a conference panel, graphically inscribed in the papers given on these panels) coordinating brain and body in a complicated way. “Tongue” and “language” are homonymous in many languages and even the English word derives from the Latin homonym “lingua”. These few translations and transferences already show that language is deeply cultural, and historical, it is nothing but product of culture with all its conflicts and efforts; languages can even die, and transform throughout history. All these implications let language always be political, even when it intends to be unpolitical — as it might do in certain art forms, in religion or in protected spheres of privacy.

“Body”, on the one hand, and “language”, on the other, seem to be imagined in Western culture as strictly separated entities. The literal translation of a book title by Shoshana Felman can give an example of this: “Le scandale du corps parlant” (the scandal of the speaking body)⁸ highlights the fact that the talking body is not at all a commonplace, but a scandal in our culture. And it has been the blind spot of so many language philosophies and linguistic investigations to acknowledge this simple fact with wide-ranging ethical and political consequences.

The media whatsoever are helping us to bridge this separation between body and language and between different bodies and languages. That the opposite also becomes true in this constellation gets visible as soon as we widen our focus to

⁸ In English published as Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1983.

a postcolonial perspective. Certain communications exclude others, not only by accident and in a contingent, meaningless way, but structurally so. The question, what we can do in this situation, is at stake in most of the papers that were presented on our panel. In his essay *Connectivity, and the Fate of the Unconnected*, Olu Oguibe states:

Many now recognize that connectivity carries with it a string of conditionalities, and in order to connect, the average individual must meet these conditionalities most of which many are ill disposed to fulfil. In other words, despite the admonition to simply connect, only a tiny fraction of humanity can, including artists. Often the predilection is to couch this discrepancy in purely geopolitical terms, that is to say, some tend to believe that only in certain parts of the world are individuals unable to attain connectivity. Almost inevitably, sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia, China and Latin America, come to mind. The premise, upon which this conclusion is often reached, is the fact that in the named polities, prerequisites of the network infrastructure such as telecommunications either do not exist, or exist in a largely compromised or mediated state. Although this is true of many such areas, the realities and conditionalities of connectivity are nevertheless more elaborate and complicated.⁹

Ethnical diversity most significantly manifests itself in the use and pragmatics of the categories “language” and “embodiment” of culture. Although Western universalism promotes the ideology or the wish for neutrality and alleged

⁹ Olu Oguibe, “Connectivity, and the Fate of the Unconnected”, in the electronic journal *Telepolis* (December 7th, 1999) www.heise.de/tp/english/inhalt/co/6551/1.html

equality between all the existing differences, certain hegemonies and predominances cannot be denied. The title of our panel could also be reformulated as: “Crossing Boundaries into Cyberspace?” contrasting our actual title: “Crossing Boundaries in Cyberspace?” Every interior crossing, every connective act on-line, in cyberspace might widen the gap between those who are already members of the connected party and the unconnected rest, which, in every respect, is, much more than only a residue. In the discussions on human rights today — pushed forward by the forces of globalisation — we face similar problems like in ethical and political perspectives on the crossing of boundaries in and into new media: Even if we have human rights in a context of laws or ethical and political guidelines, there is no executive (global) power at hand to enforce this legislature. — Which also might be a good thing, if we think about the freedom that is given up, once this executive power is taking over. Freedom, on the other hand, can always be abused for exploitative matters. Cynically enough the rights of customers in e-commerce are much better protected and insured than humanitarian and ethical proposals. I close this introduction with another quote from Olu Oguibe:

A divide emerges, then, what we may call the digital divide, between those who belong within the network and are thus able to partake of its numerous advantages, and those who are unable to fulfill the conditionalities of connectivity. It is increasingly evident that as we connect, we become part of a new ethnoscape, what one might call a netscape or cyberscape where information and individuals circulate and bond into a new community. And as this community broadens in spread and significance, we are effectively implicated in the relativization of the

rest who remain on the outside of its borders. Inconsequential as it might seem, this situation nevertheless has broad cultural implications not only for individuals and groups already in the network, but even more so for those others who exist on the outside.¹⁰

REZUMAT

Următoarele gânduri provin din introducerea unei secțiuni a conferinței anuale a College Art Association, ținută în 24 februarie 2000 la New York. Împreună cu Ursula Frohe (ZKM/ Karlsruhe, Center for Art and Media) am co-prezidat această secțiune sub titlul *Depășirea granițelor în cyberspațiu? Politica „trupului” și a „limbajului” după apariția noilor medii de informare*. Cei trei vorbitori și comentatorul Catherine Bernard (Southampton College) s-au angajat într-o vie dezbateră după prezentări, fapt care ne-a ajutat să reconsiderăm subiectul din diferite puncte de vedere. Acest text datorează mult discuției fructuoase în care și audiența a jucat un rol activ. Ca o primă și generală introducere, ea investighează conceptele cheie de „corp” și „limbaj” în fața unui fond teoretic și postcolonial al mediilor de informare. Remarcile care au urmat introducerii, făcute de Ursula Frohe, s-au axat mai precis asupra mediilor de informare electronice. Prima lucrare, cu titlul *Oculus: GPS (Ground Positioning System), Ritual, Body, Time, Space, and Conciousness* [Oculus: SPNS (Sistem de Poziționare la Nivelul Solului), ritual, corp, timp, spațiu și conștiință] a fost prezentată de Lynn Tjeman Lukas (University of Minnesota). Al doilea vorbitor a fost Brooke Knight (University of Maine), cu lucrarea

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Watch Me! Web Cams and the Public Exposure of Private Lives [Priviți-mă/Urmăriți-mă! Camere web de luat vederi și expunerea publică a vieților private], urmat de Jim Conzanzo (Pratt Institute) care a prezentat site-ul web REPOistoria sub titlul *On-line and in the Streets: "Circulation", A Site-Specific Public Art Work and Dedicated Interactive Website* [Conectat și pe străzi: „Circulația”, o formă publică de artă specifică site-ului și website-ul interactiv dedicat].

Sesiunea a fost creată pentru teoreticieni și artiști care sunt implicați în examinarea critică a implicațiilor curente și istorice ale „mediilor de informare”. Ea investighează noțiunile schimbătoare de „corp” și „limbaj” sub impactul noilor tehnologii. (Arta) Istoric, „corpul” și „limbajul” au căpătat noi semnificații prin apariția acțiunii, performării și a artei conceptuale. Retrospectiv, ele pot fi considerate impulsurile preliminare ale introducerii „noilor medii de informare” precum video, instalații interactive, Internet și realitate virtuală. Putem acumula mult din această investigație critică în înțelegerea re-structurării „spațiului” în și prin noile media. Deși „corpul” și „limbajul” sunt rar considerate medii primare ele însele, ele continuă să fie subiecte majore în reprezentările contemporane ale „media art”: „Corpul” funcționând ca ecran virtual de proiecție pentru, totuși, în majoritate utopicele promisiuni ale cyberspațiului și „limbajul” ca întruchipare a comunicării nelimitate în comunitatea globală. În reflexie pe acest fundal istoric, următoarele întrebări au condus discuțiile: Ce noțiune de „media” implică arta contemporană și practica culturală? Putem propune un concept critic asupra media fără a presupune sau exclude categoriile de „corp” și „limbaj”? Cum va redefini sfera politică juxtapunerea globalului peste/versus local? În continuare, întrebări despre consecințele „noilor politici ale mediilor de informare” se nasc: Cum sunt incluse

arta, viața, sferile publică și privată incluse în discursul cultural? Este retorica unui câștig evolutiv prin „tehnologia incluziunii globale” simptomatică pentru crescânda rigiditate a politicii granițelor, suspendată în spatele unei viziuni compensatoare a unei societăți „mediate”, unificate?

Într-o dublă abordare, această sesiune s-a axat pe de-o parte pe formarea istorică a conceptului de media în artă și cultură și, pe de altă, pe practicile și strategiile actuale ale acestor mijloace de informare ca instrumente. Cu o perspectivă istorică asupra artei media, discuția despre abordările artiștilor contemporani ne-a condus la o investigație critică a practicii media actuale.

În eseul său *Postcolonial Media Theory* [Teoria mediilor de informare postcoloniale], Maria Fernandez spune că: „În conjuncție cu dezbaterile recente în jurul subiectelor ca multiculturalism, colonialism, cinci sute de ani din 1492, politicile de identitate, studiile albilor, devine cu atât mai evident că studiile postcoloniale și teoria mediilor de informare electronice s-au dezvoltat paralel una cu alta dar cu puține puncte de intersecție. Pentru a fi siguri, cele două domenii au scopuri opuse. Studiile postcoloniale au fost preocupate în principal de imperialismul european și de efectele sale: construcția discursurilor europene de bază, rezistența, identitatea, reprezentarea, agenția, genul și migrația între alte subiecte. Prin contrast, la începutul anilor '80 și '90, teoria mediilor de informare electronice era în primul rând preocupată de stabilirea electronicii ca un domeniu valid și chiar dominant al practicii. Mulți teoreticieni făceau, conștient sau inconștient, munca de relații cu publicul pentru corporațiile digitale. Aceasta implica deseori reprezentarea de tehnologii electronice, în special computerul, fie ca neprețuit, fie ca eliberator inerent”. („Teoria postcoloniala media” în *Art*

Journal, vol. 58, nr. 3, toamna 1999, p. 59; acest eseu este o republicare extinsă din revista *Third Text*, nr. 47, vara 1999).

Considerând modul în care mediile de informare electronice au schimbat modul de percepție a comunicației, spațiului și depășirea granițelor în cel mai larg sens, nu putem neglija implicațiile politice ale acestor practici. Nu este de ajuns să analizăm condițiile electronice ale acestei dezvoltări. Trebuie să ne întoarcem la reconsiderarea unor pre-condiții de bază care sunt implicate structural în utilizarea mediilor de informare electronice. „Corpul” și „limbajul” nu sunt doar subiecte pertinente și poate chiar obsesive în arta media și în cultura electronică, ci sunt întotdeauna implicate în aceste practici. Aceste două concepte nu acoperă deja întregul câmp al condițiilor preliminare. Împreună cu aspectele politice ale „depășirii granițelor în cyberspațiu”, ele, indubitabil, marchează o poziție centrală în sfera electronică. Vreau să re-articulez pe scurt unele din relațiile generale între termenii cheie care au apărut în secțiunea noastră.

A structura cât mai dens comunicarea, interacțiunea și spațiul în categorii sociale, economice, de gen, politice, culturale etc. este una din trăsăturile majore ale design-ului urban și de arhitectură – ca și ale telecomunicațiilor. După ultima „revoluție media”, totuși, funcția spațiilor noastre locuite și orice fel de granițe naționale, culturale, politice, au fost transformate rapid și sălbatic. Aceste transformări contribuie la faptul că spațiul social – public și privat – nu este niciodată structurat după modelul unui container/recipient gol, ci ca un domeniu de multiple discursuri. Puterea, istoria, politica etc. sunt primele „interpretări practice” ale acestor structuri discursive, care ele însele încearcă să acționeze și să reacționeze în acest domeniu. Comunicarea și mobilitatea sunt următoarele înscrieri/înscrisuri de bază și permanente în aceste

domenii. Orice depășire a granițelor sau distincțiilor, orice act comunicativ sau afacere on-line poate schimba structura domeniului fără însă a fi capabilă de a-l controla în întregime. Înainte și după o privire asupra trăsăturilor tehnice ale media și comunicării, trebuie luate în considerare rolurile și efectele „corpului” și ale „limbajului” în spațiile sociale și culturale, precum și în lumea artei. „Net_Condition”/„Condiția_Net” este cel mai mare, mai complet și mai ambițios proiect despre arta și practica așa-numitului Internet, cu întâlniri simultane în Karlsruhe (Germania), Graz (Austria), Barcelona (Spania) și Tokio (Japonia), care și-a închis porțile în vremea conferinței CAA. Deși Peter Weibel, forța conducătoare din spatele acestui proiect pledează pentru „practici deschise” cu „tendențe dematerializatoare” în schimbul impunerii „lucrurilor estetice” și a „instituțiilor” care se ocupă de ele, trebuie să admitem că tocmai succesul acestui proiect va avea „efecte instituționalizatoare” și va forța fosta „deschidere” spre o definiție limitată de succesul din care a provenit și de care a fost creată. Premiile media/artă și alte forțe cratoare de canoane sunt semnul care indică aceasta. Arta media pare să experimenteze la alt nivel o dialectică similară cu cea pe care a încercat-o avangarda clasică – totuși fără succes – pentru a evada din domeniul strâmt al artei în „viața reală”. Aici am putea pune întrebări despre „realitatea” specifică a artei și a limbajului, cât și despre „realitatea” media sau a arhitecturii, iar în final, despre aspectele ‚mediale’ ale arhitecturii și design-ului urban.