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Art,Media,and Power

Art is always a product and a response to the challenge of its social and technological surroundings. The state of civilization has a great impact on consciousness which is a base for art activities since we are being constantly transformed by our own inventions (Kerckhove, 1995). This process of transformations creates also a new, widened environment for human beings, in which the biosphere has been complemented by the technosphere.

Nowadays, we are facing an enormous development of digital, information and communication technologies. Together with numerous phenomena which are the products of activities belonging to the bio-technosphere, those technologies build a complex corpus named cyberculture. In this context art has an important, critical role to play. Especially (multi)media art can serve as experimental laboratory, not only for new technologies but, first of all, for studies on the new social relationships created or encouraged by those technologies. Media and multimedia information and communication technologies bring along new problems, questions and threats. Art, on the other hand, undertakes efforts to examine this newly arising area which is at present often called a post-biological syndrome (Ascott, 1997). To say this in other words, artists not only use media technologies, but also examine them. In this sense, the new (multi)media art can be considered as a successor of the avant-garde movement. And since media technologies are first of all means of communication, the reflection on the medium leads in a natural way to the reflection on the processes of social communication, and on the new communities built on those processes. Expressing their doubts and anxieties artists ask about an impact of media technologies on social communication, roles and identities. They also ask about consequences of the development of virtual worlds. Overcoming the social fear of technological world their works question in the same time the Utopia of the Electronic Paradise.

There is a great variety of problems, issues, and important aspect which (multi)media artists elaborate in their products. In my paper I would like to concentrate only on the syndrome: art-media-power. I would like to explore the implications of the development of interactive media through the analyse of artworks. I am interested in the issues that show the way in which art has been transformed by invasion of (multi)media, digital technologies, and how those processes of transformation are related to the problems of power and authority. I address those reflections to the works of some media artists coming from different periods and different countries in order to show how different political, economic and technological contexts create different ways of approaching media.

The most important issue provided by (multi)media art is for me the problem of the control, especially if we take into account the number of powerful works and important artists dealing with this theme. This current in art must have emerged logically from the interest in characteristics of electronic media, from the reflections on obvious and hidden attributes of communication technologies. There are many aspects of that theme: the control of an artist over his/her creative process and its result - an artwork; the control of a receiver over his/her perception and an artistic phenomenon being experienced; the control of an artwork over a viewer/user/participant; the control of the art establishment (art market, galleries, museums, etc.) over an artist; the control of different power holders, different forms of authority over individuals and the society. This artistic praxis seems to

meet our deepest needs. We need to know what regimes of power and in which way use media technologies in order to fulfil their purposes which not always can be identified with our, (Wark, 1995). A few years ago the "Ars Electronica" festival focused on media acting out of control. However, we know very well that if it is easy to loose control over electronic media technology, it is much more difficult to liberate from its control.

Contemporary multimedia art, both materialized in the real space as installations, as well as virtual ones situated in the cyberspace of the Internet, frequently raises issues of power, control, and subordination. It is certainly so, because electronic technologies, being employed by art as new means of expression and being often perceived as a safeguard of the freedom of expression and communication, may be used as very efficient means of surveillance, enslavement and suppression. Concern with the nature of a used medium or, in other words, the meta-discourse approach, which characterises radical artistic activities, makes artists perceive various aspects of the dual nature of electronic media. The artists probe the syndrome of ambiguity and, as a result turns our attention to threats and promises the new medium presents. Certain works of such artists as for instance Simon Biggs, Vera Frenkel, Lynn Hershman, Antonio Muntadas, or Miroslaw Rogala may serve for interesting examples of varied, self-analytical references to the medium and its complex associations with axiological and ethical spheres. Let us look at few examples.

Shadows (1993) - interactive environment by Simon Biggs focuses on the relationship between a viewer and the artwork. Interactive process between them develops into a game in which domination seems to be an award for a winner, and subordination left for a loser. Seeking power and a struggle for control appear as main rules of the game. The viewer involved in this game may however the possibility of self-recognition, self-identification, and in result - the opportunity to withdraw from this polarisation.

Works of Vera Frenkel are intangibly linked with a group of concepts and related subjects. Central to them is the concept of identity. Identity is of subjective nature, nonetheless, it is socially conditioned. Therefore it enters a close relationship with media technologies that have become means of communication between an individual and different communities. Therefore this individual face a problem of control which s/he must gain, or, more often, which must be experienced. An individual remaining in a technologically mediated relationship to the other, takes a risk of being misrepresented. In consequence of this misrepresentation an individual may develop a communication disorder and end up in loneliness, alienation and deprivation. However, various forms of power, state power being one of the most dangerous of them, may constitute a threat to individual creative activity of the same or even larger gravity than a danger of misrepresentation. Tapes by Vera Frenkel, for instance *The Last Screening Room*, *A Valentine Day* (1984); *The Contraband Tape* (1984) and *The Business of Frightened Desires (or The Making of a Pornographer)* (1985) illustrate this issue.

One of the basic forms of individual creative activity is art. Subjective identity is expressed in (and is build by) art. Art plays a part of a communication means between us and the others. Finally, it is subjected to varied reactions from the ruling power. A popular form of this kind of reaction is censorship. It is a manifestation of control over art exercised by the state and its institutions. It is also an institutionalised form of violence. Several tapes by Vera Frenkel give a matter to this issue. In addition, they visualise cognitive and ethical dimension of art. The point is that it is art which is able to articulate true opinions, therefore it is obliged to do that. The necessity of making a choice places the artist not between the true and the untrue but between the truth and the lie. And while it is not easy to say whether what we say is true or not, we usually lie consciously. And here we find the responsibility of an artist against his/her work and at the same time against the world.

The Internet work *Room R/e* by Antonio Muntadas is another example of the interest in the problem of censorship. This is actually a database collecting different cases of censorship applied to art. Each user has not only possibility of getting acquainted with the content of the database, but also can add new cases. Interactivity which is the attribute of this work extends the field of control that the work is concerned with. *Room File* deals with control over art, as well as with control over art controlling.

The works of Lynn Hershman also build situations of reception which exceed the limits of the internal art context. Like those mentioned above they are not concerned merely with the problems of art. Hershman's works belong to a space where the questions of aesthetic come into contact with social problems, and their message relates them to the feminist discourse - although limiting her art to feminism would be an unsatisfactory simplification. The artist makes use of the powerful connotations of the pair: look - body, fundamental to her work, to create situations where the look directed at the work becomes the voyeur's gaze, infringing upon somebody's privacy, intimacy and security.

The diverse implications are present both in Hershman's earliest works and in the latest projects and include bodylessness, simulation, virtual identity, manipulation, the relation between private and public space. But the fullest expression and the most perfect (so far) union of artistic feeling with means of realisation were achieved by Lynn Hershman in her interactive installations. A specific property of Hershman's installations is their peculiar active character; her works turn back the viewers' gaze, letting them experience the state of being both the subject and the object of observation, gain-

ing the control or being under control. The viewer looking at a created world simultaneously becomes the looked-at object. Voyeurism is uncovered and the observer status - shaken and problematised. Hershman's works struggle for subjectivity; their construction presents the viewers with an opportunity to realise the mechanisms governing their social behaviour, and exposes the camouflaged rules by strength of which they appropriate works of art.

In the installation *Room of One's Own* (1990-93), the camera follows the viewer's eyeball movements and transforms them into a digital signal, enabling the work to adjust itself to the viewers' perceptual behaviour. Thus it speaks not only of asymmetrical relations between people (i.e., such that can be described by the pairs active / passive or active / reactive), but also about interpretation of art works and the rules of perception itself.

America's Finest (1994) places the viewers in the field of fire of a "weapon" they are operating, thus gives equal status to people on both sides of the view-finder and links the media world with the world of death. The viewer becomes both the aggressor and the victim, and the objectifying look obtains extremely negative connotations.

Both the above installations do not permit the viewer to retain his/her contemplative/voyeuristic detachment from the perceived objects. They draw him/her into an interaction, during and as a result of which s/he is forced to realise the nature of the processes in which s/he takes part. Thus, as the distance from the work decreases, there appears an awareness of the interdependence between the structure of the object and the structure of its perception; the distance from the latter increases, bringing about a detachment of the subject from himself and his own behaviour (Kluszyński, 1996a).

Lovers Leap (1995) by Mirasaw Rogala is an intricate environment. The spectator, who moves in the monitored space with a transmitter and headphones on his/her head, is the only one to experience the sound dimensions of the work. His/her movement results in the changes in the visual sphere as well as in the sound one. The spectator with the transmitter observes the changes of the perspective and he is aware that his/her movement brings about those changes. The spectator does not immediately realise how it is done (if at all). Awareness of fulfilling a controlling function does not become the form of exercising control. That asymmetry motivates the spectator into actions leading to gaining thorough understanding, which, in turn, means absolute control and power. Awareness of all these relationships however may incline him/her to make other choices, since the work questions both the value and possibility of overall control.

We can easily notice that this is interactive art to provide the most interesting examples of works dealing with the issue of power and control nowadays. This is probably because interactivity in a sense means control. Interactive art provides the viewers possibility of gaining control over their perception, over the process of creating form and meaning of the work. And since also the artists often want to maintain (to some extent) control over all those processes, interactive art communication appears as a serious game of taking over, losing and retaking control. The issue of power and control belongs to the essential qualities of interactive art, and thus the syndrome art-media-power should be considered as characteristic for the contemporary situation of artistic culture.

Until the end of the 1980s an ideological context used to influence artistic media practices in the East- and Central-European countries much deeper than in western ones, where, in turn, commercial conditions of work influenced art strategies to a much larger extent. When Richard Serra was producing his videotape *Television Delivers People*, video artists in Poland kept analysing the medium of television, trying to uncover conventions of representation, and their political functions. The role and character of television was investigated, despite the fact that video was recognized as a separate medium. Polish video artists maintained a certain detachment from TV, and this stance (more ideological than purely artistic) was maintained until the end of the eighties. As Jozef Robakowski, the major figure in media art in Poland, wrote in 1976: "Video art is entirely incompatible with the utilitarian character of that institution (television), it is the artistic movement, which through its independence denounces the mechanism of the manipulation of other people" (Kluszyński, 1995: 36). This is also the additional (after pure artistic) reason why numerous Polish video artists dealt with relationship between the reality, its audiovisual representation, and the spectator. They attempted to reveal the relative nature of perception, and to explore the resulting possibilities of manipulating the perception, of exercising control. Especially Wojciech Bruszewski exploited the area between reality and its audiovisual representation expressing a total distrust of any form of mediated communication. He focused on, what he called an universal relativism which was usually camouflaged by the attribution to conventions of an autonomous value. And just the media art was called upon, in Bruszewski's view, to demystify, uncover conventionalism in our perception of reality. This attitude led him eventually to the conception of the self-generating text as being a limitless source of multiplying meanings which in fact communicate nothing (in the traditional sense of the term) because they represent nobody and nothing.

The world "control" almost did not exist in declarations of Polish media artists, it was usually replaced by another one: "manipulation". The artists did not analyse how to gain the control, but how to main-

tain freedom. In other words, they exercise control only to protect freedom, to protect the identity. This approach was (and still is) extremely important for aforementioned artist Jozef Robakowski. For him art is just a synonym of freedom. In 1988 he published a manifesto entitled "I manipulate." He wrote: "... throughout the whole life of my art I have fed on the manipulation which has served to blur the clear personal image. I am convinced that the artist is a kind of perfidious fraud, an ulcer in society whose vitality is a manipulation on his/her own account as an expression of self-defence against annihilation, or in other words, against public acceptance and recognition." (Klusmynski, 1996).

It is interesting to observe how the polinca' transformations in Eastern and Central-European countries nowadays bring all those different issues together. There is no more old regime, and art can develop without any direct political pressure. The economic aspect of the creative media work becomes more and more important. Different history, different past makes however the presence different as well. In result, those countries enter the cultural exchange with the West from the position of the antipodes (Wark, 1995). That means the identity is still in danger. This time, however, danger is coming from outside, together with advanced communication technology. And the artists have to protect their identity, the identity of their art and their culture not against any political regime, but against "regimes of technology via which the West created its relation to its antipodes" (Wark, 1995: 9). The new soft technological and cultural invasion replaced the old hard political oppression.

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