New Media Art as Transcultural Interface

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Full text	**New Media Art as Transcultural Interface**

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In the area of new media communication art we have to do with the process of cultural hybridisation. Net art may assume all discussed forms: expression of local culture, an agent of modernization, or a personal fantasy, being however in each case a merger of different and unpredictable cultural systems.

Problem of identity belongs to the most discussed questions in the field of cultural studies nowadays. In most of the cases it is closely related to the issue of cyberculture and its characteristic instruments of expression: new digital communication media. Debates on identity in the context of new media aim to

develop critical discourses concerning the position and features of the individual in the age of the global transcultural communication. Discussions, which locate such problems in the framework of art, extend sometimes the psychological concept of identity understood as an approach to specify a set of qualities defining the individual in order to ask about the identity of the work of art. In consequence, if we deal with the question of identity in the context of artistic practices we have to distinguish between two different aspects of the identity issue and between two separate although closely intermingled problems.

1. The problem of identity of the art work, which might mean the symbolic/cultural status of the work of art.
2. The problem of identity of the artist – the individual considered as the creator of the artwork.

Those problems, as I have already mentioned, in a sense are separate from each other and autonomous, yet merged with one another in contemporary discourses on art. Analysis of the status of the artwork, before they come to any conclusion, must have been linked to the concern of the relationships between the work and the artist.

Another reason explaining this close relation between them both comes from the fact that they have probably the same source: the modernist crisis of self-cognition. After Mark Poster (2001, 6-11) I distinguish between the notions individual, self, identity, and subject. If we turn to the works of Erik Erikson to understand what is the meaning of the term of identity, we will come to the idea that it is nothing but continuous process of self-negotiation (and re-negotiation) of the subject. If we talk on identity, we refer to "an individual who is deeply confused about who he or she is" (Poster, 2001, 7). The same confusion however we face nowadays when we try to specify the notion of art or work of art. The crisis of subjectivity and the crisis of both aesthetics and theory of art create together the context for our consideration.

Such an approach leads in consequence towards questions concerning belonging or representation. We may ask: Does a particular work of art belong to the specific, individual, internal world of the artist? Or rather: Does it belong to a certain cultural context? We may ask: Does it represent a position, an artistic approach or simply an individual history of the artist? Or rather: Does it represent a specific culture? Or maybe: Does it represent just a medium itself? Discussions around these dilemmas become especially boisterous when concern new media arts, and especially – net art. And this area – new media art, which I understand as digital, interactive art of communication will be the subject of analyses in this paper. Net art, to which I will be referring quite often, is considered here as the best representative of new media art.

It's time now to have a closer look at those two aspects of identity reflected in the discussions on new media and net art. As a good example may serve a debate hosted on the online forum <eyebeam><blast> in 1998. I will be referring to this on-line discussion through a book INTERACTION: Artistic Practice in the Network, which is kind of summary of that Internet-based exchange of ideas. The discussed topic I would like to refer here is represented in this book by a chapter entitled: "Identity: Where Is Global?" In the framework of that discussion Lew Manovich presented the standpoint, which triggered off numerous voices of comment. Manovich said that "the Internet functions as an agent of modernization, just as other means of communication did before" (53). What followed was even more provocative for other participants of the debate: "…we in the West, should not expect culturally-specific Internet art, should not wait for Internet dialects, for some national school of Net art. This simply would be a contradiction in terms" (53). "So-called Net art projects are simply manifestations of social, linguistic, and psychological networks being created or at least made visible by these very projects, of people entering the space of modernity…" (54).

The opposition to the concept of Manovich assumed different forms. The simplest and most direct answer, like the one by Pedro Meyer, just proclaimed, that "… it is precisely the Internet that will offer the possibility for art to create the 'national schools' as expression of diversity, because no longer does such art require that they travel through the gauntlet of the traditional metropolitan centers of dominance for them to circulate and be seen" (54). Meyer as well as Andy Deck assumed that problem with recognizing national schools of net art came from the unequal levels of technological development throughout the world, so it may be too early to discount the potential for regionalism in he field of communication art (54).

Another critical perspective on Manovich's idea of net art came from Simon Biggs. He pointed out problems with the concept of modernization, which over the previous twenty years had become very problematic. Biggs did not develop that issue. I would like however to strengthen this position adding, that problem with modernization is not only part of philosophical debates of postmodernity. Arjun

Appadurai (1999) indicated another important reason to deepen our suspicion about the idea of modernization: a tension between modernization and modernity. He reminded that modernization (in ex-colonial countries like India) appeared unable to deliver modernity. Modernization with its powerful instruments, like high technology, science, and education, did not succeed in providing "space of justice, access, equality, emancipation and participation that modernity was intended to imply" (59). One might say that since modernization fell into discredit, there is no sense in promoting the idea of Internet as an agent of modernization.

Biggs did not limit himself to problematizing the concept of modernization. He joined, although shyly, Meyer and Deck to put forward (again) the idea of possibility (only), that "…the Net will lead to an accelerated localization of creative activity in relation to socio-linguistic space" (55).

Should we agree with Meyer, Deck, and Biggs, that the Internet could allow for development of the national or local schools of Net art? We might accept such a concept only if we assume that Internet is sort of a neutral means of communication, transporting various forms, meanings, and values created outside its structure, sort of "neutral instrument of community, connecting preestablished ethnic identities" (Poster, 2001, 167). Or if we assume that characteristics of the Internet as a medium only add to the characteristics of the work of net art and not destroy its connections with the local context of production. However appearance of one of those circumstances is a necessary condition but only for the possibility of cultural localisation of the work to emergence but it is not a condition sufficient, or determining necessary result.

Alex Galloway, like Manovich does not think, that "there will be many culturally-specific categories within future Net art, especially culturally-specific categories as there have been in art history" (56). He predicted two scenarios for future development of net art:

1. [A] general relapse to nationalist/localizing networks as a style" (56), which I understand as a sort of post-modernist pastiche, stylisation, or another game-like art strategy.
2. Creating private net art; in this case "Net art will remake itself upon each viewing as a sort of personal fantasy art" (56).

From those two predictions of Galloway I will keep for further considerations only the latter one. I have a problem with the former: I do not understand how could we talk about stylisation of something which does not exist. Stylisation, pastiche, and all the other parasite cultural strategies require their victims, bodies, upon which they could feed. If we declare the existence of the stylisation ("nationalist/localizing networks as a style") that means however that at the same time we affirm the existence of the system of symbolization represented in the stylisation. Turning down the possibility of existence of locally oriented Net art Galloway deprived himself of the possibility of proclaiming existence of its stylisations.

In his second proposal Galloway proclaim diversity as a fundamental quality and virtue of "our contemporary experience". Personal fantasy becomes in his concept the only context for the work of Net art, creating alternative to the concept of modernization.

The choice between "the net art as an agent of modernization", and the net art "as a sort of personal fantasy art" is however not satisfactory either. If we accept such a frame of reflection and in addition – I would like to remind about that assumption – consider net art as just an extreme form of new media communication art, we might even argue that to some extent all kinds of new media art are becoming in this way more and more culturally neutral. I would like however to put forward a different perspective. I want to argue that because something like culturally neutral symbolic form simply cannot exist, because art is always culturally formed, we only have to do in the area of new media communication art with the process of cultural hybridisation. This mean that the whole discussion I refer to is based on an initial and fundamental misunderstanding. Net art might assume all discussed forms: expression of local culture, an agent of modernization, or a personal fantasy, being however in each case a merger of different, contingent, and unpredictable cultural systems.

A useful in this respect concept comes from Mark Poster. He proposes to consider Internet as an underdetermined medium. Referring to Luis Althuser and his idea of overdetermination he wrote that excess of causes leads paradoxically to "the contingency of events" (17). The term "underdetermination" refers to such "social objects [which] level of complexity of indeterminateness goes one step further. Not only are these objects formed by distinct practices, discourses, and institutional frames (…) but they are also open to practice" (17). In the case of the Internet we have to do with the opening to trans-cultural practice. Since this hybrid-cultural

aspect of new media communication is always being established individually in the process of constructing the meaning of the experience, the new media art serves in this process for an interface. New media art serves as transcultural interface.

Another problem, which appeared on the periphery of the related discussion seems to be much more important. Gilane Tawardos pointed out that problem of cultural identity involve questions of power and global stratification. She noticed that "authenticity, which is assessed by others, is always in question if you fail to conform or fit within certain fixed categories and identities" (Scholder, Crandall, 57). She referred to Catherine David's remark that "identity had now eclipsed by identification processes" (Scholder, Crandall, 57). And even if we say that we can identify ourselves in the way we choose, we also have to ask about the context of our decisions. Arjun Appadurai wrote about seduction and tyranny of local tradition. He called to develop interactive experiences between different cultural regions, to "imagine all traditions as available for the work of the production of one's own locality" (Appadurai, 1999, 59).

Michel Foucault (1982) claims that identity is actually a social, not individual construct. I would develop this concept saying that the only personal, individual aspect of identity is what has been recognized as imposed from outside, socially-culturally fabricated to perform us for us. The only way to discover what I am is to discover what I am not. There is nothing but negative individualization of identity. Let's have a look at the artistic example.

In December 1976, Croatian artist Sanja Iveković exhibited her Double-life 1959-1975 (documents for autobiography) in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (this exhibition was followed by three other representing the same approach or project (Tragedy of a Venus, 1975; Bitter Life, 1975; Sweet Life, 1975-76). The show consisted of two streams of photographs grouped in non-random pairs. One set of photographs was composed of the pictures showing Iveković herself in various periods of her life. The other grouped the photographs of women and girls taken from European magazines. Photographs belonging to the two sets were paired on the basis on the similarities in appearance, looks, props, locations and situations. The artist compared her own portraits to the pictures of unknown women to ask with anxiety for the sources of the analogies. Asking for analogies was simultaneously asking for the nature of identity. The exhibition contained an intriguing concept: the particular identity is to a lesser extent a result of one's conscious decisions and choices or the genetic heritage than the product of exterior systems and institutions.

The individual is subject to influences resulting from different premises and leading into different directions. He or she is under pressure to comply with different requirements and is corrected in the event of non-compliance. Videotape of Polish born Canadian artist Kinga Araya entitled National Anthem (2002) is a perfect example illustrating this problem, presenting the process of adjusting an individual to particular cultural patterns, the process of deprivation of what someone consider as his or her attributes.

The fluidity of identity transformations is subject to continuous disruptions. Instead of a single, even wide current, it takes the form of numerous currents flowing into different directions. Sometimes they come together. Sometimes they diverge. Such a picture of identity is no longer recognized and comprehended even by the individual himself or herself. And this is the source of the question 'Who am I?', which is asked over and over again. This question can be answered with stories. Identity becomes narrative. A series of narratives.

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