

# IMAGINING THE SOCIAL CHANGE: NEW MEDIA IN CZECH ART DISCOURSE IN THE 1990'S

Jindra Veselska

This paper focuses on the emergence of new media in Czech discourse about contemporary art in 1990s. It works with specialized art journals and exhibition catalogues from 1990 to 1999 with the focus on narrative of information revolution in context of then social and political transformation.

Although usually considered in the context of artworks, imagination, in this paper, is taken into account as a part of the discourse about new media art. [1] As such it is restored on the basis of documents written in that era and considered as providing a horizon for practices of shaping the identity of new media art in the Czech Republic in the nineties. As I will point out, certain recurring discursive practices, which (re)appear in the situation of a technological change throughout media history, can be uncovered in the Czech art discourse this way.

In doing so, my approach combines the discourse theory with archaeology of media, since the latter is characterized as studying "recurring cyclical phenomena that (re)appear and disappear and reappear over and again in media history", while focusing especially on discourses „that guide and mould its development, rather in the 'things' and 'artifacts.'" [2] Archaeological perspective on media history allows us to focus on systems of statements in their own right and historical conditions that defined the discursive space. Even though the visions attributed to a new medium might seem exaggerated or even foolish at first sight, they are not considered here from the normative perspective as false or banal statements, because for the archaeology the originality/banality opposition is not relevant since it establishes no hierarchy of value. Rather than treating them from the perspective of their possible realization and the discrepancy between them and reality, which would mean overlooking the importance of their repetitive character, this paper focuses on the circumstances and relations that constitute them.

Combining the archaeological approach with Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's concept of discursive as social [3] [4] enables us to look on this 'recurring cyclical phenomenon' as a social practice. It also takes us to the point where we interpret these practices as (re)activated throughout media (art) history rather than cyclically (re)appearing. [2]

Looking perspectively at how media history was articulated, it becomes apparent that the term 'new technologies' is in fact a historical term. This is the case especially with the concept of new media, since no general definition was actually settled in the Czech media art discourse in the '90s, and the limitation of this concept is still ambiguous. At the beginning of the nineties the concept of new media was used for digital technologies that have emerged after television (while television was considered a traditional medium) such as interactive installations and videoart, but in the mid-nineties the concept was extended to ICT technologies and the Internet.

Soon after the revolutionary year of 1989 and since the beginning of the 1990s, there occurred a visible tendency in the Czech discourse to see the new media as one of the tools that would assist in overcoming the past totalitarian regime and also help with establishing the regained democratic system. In this enthusiastic atmosphere much hope was placed on the new media, expected to facilitate a radical social change. Regarding the social field of the contemporary art of the era, these expectations were located within the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) that was founded in Prague in September 1992 as a part of a network of twenty centres located in the capital cities of the former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The centres were founded not only to provide support for the new media art activities within the field of contemporary art, but also in order to introduce the Internet to general public.

According to its director at that time, Ludvík Hlavacek, the SCCA aimed to put visual arts back in the centre of social life. In doing so, the centre placed a particular emphasis on the new media in contemporary art, as they were supposed to introduce a new model of social relationships into the art world. In the mid 1990s, the SCCA organized an exhibition entitled 'Orbis Fictus. New Media in Contemporary Art'. In the texts that were written for the exhibition catalogue, the assumption of radical social change brought about by new technology is almost taken for granted. Here the art was largely viewed as a form of mediated communication between the author and the viewer, and many hopes were placed on its interactivity, enabling viewers to participate in the work of art, as well as on the possibility that through the Internet, it can be spread directly to the audience all over the world. Museums and galleries were no longer considered suitable for presenting this art. The new media were presented as a *democratic* improvement of the older *passive* media. They appeared to hold the opportunity for a new, more open and democratic communication, but this 'communicative, creative and critical potential' was supposed to be able to reveal its form only as media art, otherwise it would have yielded to economic, military and political pressures. [5]

It has been already recognized by Walter Benjamin that this utopian vision of a social change delivered by the fusion of art and technology is not new at all. It is actually a certain amount of discursive practices that evokes old utopias, dreams and myths, presenting them as new over and over again.

In order to be able to emphasise the newness of the new technology, first of all there has to be some kind of relationship created with the old one, in order to constitute the possibility of a revolutionary rupture with the past. Using the already existing technology of television that had already worked in numerous meaning systems, the new media was presented in the Czech discourse as more valuable and promising than the existing technology. The new technology was actually conceptualized through the opposition of old and new, which, as every binary opposition, embraces a hierarchy. In other words, the new technologies' identity was constituted through establishing a hierarchy within the discourse structure. Based on this hierarchy, the old technologies were marked as traditional, passive, old-fashioned, while the space for promising new media was being created.

Regarding the Ernesto Laclau's theory of discourse, the essential point here is his concept of discourse as a field of the social in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of social signifiers around themselves. [4] The moment of political transformation from totalitarian to democratic regime in the Czech Republic in the 1990s, when a democratic social order was being established, was beneficial to the reappearance of myths and utopias. In this euphoric but also very chaotic atmosphere the whole field of contemporary art was being repaired and restructured after fifty years of censorship and state control of art institutions. This historical situation was met with the emergence of new media

and in order to give them a significant and dominant articulation within a specialized discourse of contemporary art, these promises of possible new social order delivered by new media art were reactivated. Since the myths function as a surface on which social demands can be inscribed, they were useful in articulating the identity of new media, according to particular projects within the (re)constitution of the field of Czech contemporary art after 1989. However, while the promises such as 'building a bridge between the contemporary art and the public' were being proliferated, the new media was actually held back by this conventional imagination of myths and utopias that had already been well known. On the one hand new media's potential for radical social change was emphasised, on the other hand (re)activated discursive practices fitted it into old schemas.

### **References and Notes:**

1. *This paper was written with the support from Grant Agency of Charles University in Prague.*
2. Erkki Huhtamo, "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes toward an Archeology of Media," *Leonardo* 30, no.3 (1997): 221-224.
3. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
4. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, (London-New York: Verso, 1990).
5. Andreas Ströhl, "Flusser and Beyond. Communication Philosophy, Media Art and Media Theory at the Prague Goethe Institut", in *Orbis Fictus: Nova Media v Soucasnem Umeni*, ed. Ludvik Hlavacek and Marta Smolikova, 133-140(Praha: Sorosovo Centrum Soucasneho Umeni, 1996).