

FROM LITERAL TO METAPHORICAL UTOPIAS: SPACE AND TIME IN THE WHITE CUBE

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In its literal sense, the term 'utopia' refers to the absence of *topos*. This condition is inherent in the new media artwork, which due to its immaterial status is not physically tied to a specific space unless displayed. In its metaphorical sense, 'utopia' has a significant ideological background. This paper attempts to indicate how the literal lack of *topos* of the new media artwork is related to its utopian nature.

When a term has different meanings, both literal and metaphorical, there is usually a common ground where all connotations intersect. Interestingly enough, the affinities between different meanings can go beyond the obvious, revealing historical interconnections and dialectical patterns.

Indeed, the term utopia [*outopia*] in its literal sense, refers to the absence [*ou*] of place [*topos*]. In its metaphorical sense, in which it is used today, 'utopia' is a term that originates from Thomas More's inaugural text and it seeks to describe the author's imaginary island country. According to Fredric Jameson analysis, two distinct lines of descendancy may be identified from More's text. This major distinction is also adopted here. The first notion of utopia refers to the systemic, revolutionary political practice, aiming at founding a whole new society. The other line of descent, more obscure, refers to the omnipresent utopian impulse related to "the deceptive yet tempting swindles of here and now, where Utopia serves as the mere lure and bait for ideology." [1]

When it comes to the new media, their literal lack of *topos* is intrinsically related to their profoundly utopian nature. In other words, the metaphorical is essentially linked to the literal in many levels. This paper attempts to trace some of the interconnecting threads between those two dimensions of utopia.

Literal U-topias

One of the most fundamental characteristics of the new media image - a term that embraces digital or analogical moving image in all its imaginable forms - is its lack of *topos*. The moving image is a latent immaterial entity stocked in a device (digital or analogical) and thus deprived of actually occupying physical space. This absence of space, or more specifically, the lack of actual, material volume derives from the lack of objects. Of course, going beyond the object is not an exclusively new media characteristic. Conceptual art has been practically based on that principle. And, even before that, the *objet d'art* per se had already been through an important demystification since the ready made.

Abolishing the material entity of the work of art has clear political connotations. Lucy Lippard introduced the term 'dematerialisation' of the art [2] in order to describe the urge of going beyond the official art by spreading it in all social layers. Art would thus become a common activity and consequently notions of property and reproduction of the work would be eliminated. Dematerialized art would therefore actively participate in the transformation of the society. Art would then disappear in the sense that it would be generalised throughout society as the very aesthetisation of daily life. The fusion of art with

life, in a Marxist approach would be the negation of the division of mental and manual labour, which is a prior condition of the separation of mankind in classes.

Even if the fusion of life and art is a highly utopian, and thus an unattainable desire, the detachment from the object of art is a fact. And the non-object art a priori cannot be distributed, sold and collected. To speak in Marxist terms, non-object art materializes the negation of commodity fetishism.

But still, even if the new media image per se does not have a material entity, in new media art objects do exist even if their status is peculiar. The material part of the work consists of the tools used to present the image (monitor or videoprojector) as well as the physical container of the image such as the videotape (replaced nowadays with DVD, USB etc). If the projecting or broadcasting apparatus is an auxiliary part, in the sense that it's not connected to the work, the videotape is intrinsically linked to the image itself: it is the medium containing the message that is conserved in a latent form.

The question that is naturally raised is whether this storage apparatus is capable of counterbalancing the object's absence, thus rendering the work susceptible of being integrated into the distribution circuit.

New media artwork a priori resists commercialisation due to its fundamental characteristic: the reproducibility. Every tangible format of conserved moving image is in fact a copy that can be further reproduced without any limit. In every day life, for every work there are several exhibition copies, screening copies, not to mention conservation copies to different media following the evolution of the technology. All these *simulacra* prove to which extent we can happily (and legally) reproduce any work without any consequences to its nature or status. Hence, there is not such thing as authentic or unique videotape, or DVD or even worse, as authentic computer file.

In order for video art to enter the market, that characteristic had to be abolished. As a matter of fact, an absurd system of artificial control of the potentially unlimited reproducibility of the medium has been invented: the mode of limited editions, accompanied by certificates that assure the 'authenticity' of each copy. The limitation of the number of copies creates the illusion of exclusivity and thus increases its market value.

Historically speaking, at the dawn of the creation of new media art, artists acknowledged the challenge that the non-object status and the reproducibility of the medium represented for the institutions. The institutional critique became a major pillar of their ideological framework since their desire was not to enter the system but to transform it profoundly; [3] institutional critique should thus be perceived as a major aspect of the utopian urge to change the society and to merge art with life.

Installing the Image or the Passage to a *Topos*

If controlling new media art reproducibility, or in other words, establishing the commodity fetishism was one way of taming its utopian nature, settling down the image via the installation was the second.

The new media image a priori lacks *topos*. When displayed within the context of a new media installation, the moving image, "hung" on the wall or onto the monitor - to speak in traditional exhibition terms - acquires a physical location and becomes a more or less physical presence within the exhibition space.

However, even when the image comes into being in a specific place, it remains immaterial and thus deprived of volume. Consequently, no space is physically occupied by the moving image per se (monitors or projectors cannot be considered as part of the artwork as such, since they are auxiliary devices) and the space of the installation is practically empty. Yet, when the image unfolds in that specific place it activates a specific space. That space is a zone within the white cube - turned black for the occasion - where the moving image meets the viewer and creates "a passage for bodies and figures in space and time." [4] In other words, in spite of its immaterial nature, the image creates a space, namely the installation territory.

But when it comes to the moving image, which space and which time exactly are we referring to? Within the physical place of the installation, a second one is embedded, the filmic here and now of the moving image. The actual place where the image was taken is being transferred via the projection into the actual installation space, creating an additional spatiotemporal layer. These two parallel levels co-existing simultaneously generate several dialectical patterns. A typical example of conjunction of these two layers is the reconstitution of the filmic spatiotemporal condition within the installation space. In *Mapping the Studio II with Color Shift, Flip, Flop & Flip/Flop (Fat Chance John Cage)*, (2001) Bruce Nauman adjusts seven cameras in his studio in a way that they cover the largest part of its surface and lets them film for approximately 6 hours. When installed, the image that derives from this camera circuit is being projected without editing on seven 3x2 meter screens covering the entire gallery. His studio is thus being virtually transported and reconstructed via the moving image in the installation space. Freely interpreting Borges' mapping, Nauman grafts his studio space onto the gallery space, creating a virtual map of the same scale as the empire itself.

Borrowing the terms of the Foucauldian theory of heterotopia, the new media installation is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several sites that are in themselves incompatible." [5] By going further in the analysis of the new media installation's spatiotemporal condition, one realises that it can be considered as a paradigmatic contemporary heterotopia. Because it is, in fact, "a system of opening and closing that both isolates (the sites) and makes them penetrable". The new media installation is a temporary construction within the exhibition space made basically with temporal walls and curtains. It is often closed, partially or entirely, in order to avoid the spilling out of image and sound. By outlining its limits, in more or less radical ways, the work preserves its own integrity. At the same time, the blackout curtains or the narrow passages between walls constitute the points of entrance for the viewers.

According to Gaston Bachelard, (space) "in its countless alveoli contains compressed time". [6] Which is true for all kinds of spaces but in the case of heterotopias, they "are most often linked to slices in time". When it comes to the new media installation, the temporality of the artwork corresponds to the duration of the video image. That slice in time is repeated in a loop, thus establishing a temporality specific to the artwork. Hence, an exhibition turns into an assemblage of several spatiotemporal islets evolving simultaneously.

Like all heterotopias, new media installations "are not oriented towards the eternal". The work is ephemeral since when the projector is switched off, the image disappears without leaving any tangible traces behind, evoking an old anarchist slogan saying "your civilization ends when the electricity is cut off".

This unique and complex spatiotemporal condition is the outcome of transforming a 'u-topian' entity into a concrete here and now. At the same time, by installing the image, a utopian, wild form of art has

been gradually transformed into a tame, official and lately mainstream form of museum art, and consequently it has entered the market. As Martha Rosler points out, “museumization has heightened the importance of installations that make video into sculpture, painting or still life because installations can live only in museums”.

The term ‘museumization’ within the framework of the institutional critique surely has pejorative connotations. However, the creation of a new species, even if it is mostly museum oriented, has enriched the art ecosystem. Beyond all political or social connotations, the new media installation as a form has opened a new field of experimentation and research, to which we owe some of the most splendid artworks of the last decades.

New Media as the New Utopia

Along with the utopias that arise from a political context, new media art has also reflected a broader utopian impulse. Through new media, the archetypical desire to tame nature and gain control has found a whole new field that would enable people to overcome the barriers of time and space, reviving even the ancient dream of teleportation. Inspired by the visionary theories of McLuhan, a vast literature, ranging from new media theory to science fiction, has outlined the belief in the miraculous potential of new media. They were about to inaugurate a new fascinating but also frightening world, situated somewhere between dream and reality.

A very characteristic media artwork that reflects that point of view is *Good Morning Mr Orwell* (1984) a new media performance orchestrated by Nam June Paik. On January 1st 1984, Merce Cunningham’s minimalistic dance and Joseph Beuys’ actions among other performances were transmitted to millions of spectators in different continents via a live broadcast shared between the Centre Pompidou and WNET TV in New York. The programme was also broadcasted in Germany and in Korea thereby developing an international network. Whereas the title of the work evokes the negative aspect of mass media, namely the Orwellian nightmare of mass surveillance, Paik seeks to prove that the television could eventually serve a positive purpose such as interconnecting people by rendering art available at the same time around the entire world.

It is the same spirit that emerges with his legendary video *Global Groove* (1973), the manifesto of the new video culture willing to become the melting pot of all different cultures and beliefs. Video was perceived by Paik as the new desperado language. In his most famous installations *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965), where he recreates the moon phases onto monitors or *TV Cross* (1966), where nine monitors form a cross, Paik translates major icons and symbols of the humanity into the electronic image thereby creating a new universal visual vocabulary.

Driven by genuine fascination for the new media technology, Nam June Paik, the neo-romantic artist who wore Wellington boots in his studio for fear of being electrocuted, visualised a whole new world; new media technology would create a new visual culture resulting from the fusion of electronic music, performing arts and video image. In a state of totally utopian delirium, Paik went far enough to foresee medical implementations of the new media image. He believed that in the near future new media image would cure the blindness or that it would be used as an electro-visual tranquilizer (sic). [7]

A few decades later, the fascination towards the capacity of breaking the barriers of space and time switched medium, from television to internet. Internet is the new Utopian excellence. The question of

time and space, the reality of here and now definitely attains its more complicated and intriguing form. The ability of crossing the borders of time and space reinforced the development of a political framework. The delirious contemporary rhetoric based on the perception of internet as an immense collectivity is evocative of that political context; “digital revolution” or “virtual community” has become everyday language whereas the famous McLuhian term “global village” has been literally concretized in the internet era.

Just like the socio-political background of the television and the explosion of the mass media in 1960 and 1970 has been reflected in the video art, the political aspect of the (virtual) new land of promise has been crystallised in the internet art. The guerrilla television and the video works related to political activism that have marked the highly utopian era of videoart have been reproduced online three decades later. Tactical media, various forms of activism and openly political works denouncing the commercial use of internet have been at the core of the internet art creation (at least at the beginning); RTMark, etoys, Jodi to name just a few legendary moments. Their artistic status is quite ambiguous since, as Julian Stallabrass points out, “on the internet the border between political activism and cultural creation has been particularly porous.” [8]

What we have described so far as the literally ‘u-topian’ status of the new media image makes its museum exhibition extremely challenging. If exhibiting a videotape is difficult, exhibiting an internet site is much more complicated. The institutionalisation of net art is indeed a very long and fascinating story that goes beyond the framework of this paper and will not be analysed in detail. However, the most interesting element here is the fact that the denial of internet ‘u-topian’ nature serves as a way to tame its utopian, revolutionary character. Two major examples support this primary thesis. First of all, internet sites are very often exhibited off-line. Cutting off the site from the web corresponds to the denial of the artwork’s vital space. At the same time, the site is practically amputated since all the external links are automatically deactivated. The isolation of the site from the web prevents bad surprises regarding the exhibited content that could easily vary from pornography to personal email accounts provoking disturbing situations to the institutions.

The second one is, once again, the transformation of an internet site into an installation. Even if “video art’s fate in the museum offers a dire warning to internet art” [9] when the latter is presented in a museum gallery it is usually bound to the actual here and now of the exhibition space. Media art history is indeed very coherent and repetitive since just like video artists have passed from videotape to video installation, internet artists have also developed net art installations seeking a more exhibition friendly form. That was a normal step of net art’s evolution according to Peter Weibel since “it is the system of art that obliges artists to express their ideas in a specific space.” [10] Hence, the “museumification” of this new media art passed, once again, through the installation of the new media image in a specific space narrowing both ‘u-topian’ and utopian characteristics.

New media art evolves in a profoundly paradoxical, if not schizophrenic, condition: new media constitute the key for the expansion of late capitalism and yet they can endorse, create and diffuse the most fundamentally revolutionary content. Ranging from globalised commerce to local revolutions, from state propaganda to alternative journalism and direct democracy, and from pornography to art and science, the contemporary form of new media, internet, can engulf the most contrary aspects. That profound endemic antinomy is embedded in “globalization itself, which can indeed pass effortlessly from a dystopian vision of world control to the celebration of world multiculturalism with the mere changing of a valence”. [11] Red Art can, indeed, flourish within the late capitalism reality. Maybe because capitalism is strong enough to appropriate it for its own good. Nevertheless, Utopia, standing at the crossroads

between reality and imagination, faith and deception, authenticity and appropriation, exists as an everlasting source of inspiration for art and for life, even if their fusion has not yet been accomplished.

References and Notes:

1. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London-New York: Verso, 2005), 3.
2. The term was introduced in Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's article, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Art International* 12, no. 2 (1968).
3. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, 31 (New York: Aperture, 1990).
4. Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The body, the Image and the Space-in-Between," in *Illuminating Video*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, 154 (New York: Aperture, 1990).
5. Michel Foucault, "Des Autres Espaces," in *Dits et écrits par Michel Foucault 1954-1988, Volume IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). English Translation by Jay Miscowiec in the Michel Foucault texts' database <http://foucault.info> (accessed May 12, 2011). All quotes come from that translation.
6. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 8
7. Nam June Paik, *Video n Videology* (Syracuse, New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1974).
8. Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: the Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*(London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 90.
9. *Ibid.*, 120.
10. Interview with the author in Paris on February 2005.
11. Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London-New York: Verso, 2005), 215.