THE SONIC PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

The Aesthetic and Tactical Dimensions of the Performances by Projekt Atol

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ABSTRACT

A continuation of series of performances by the Slovene art organisation Projekt Atol, commenced in 1997 at documenta X in Kassel, Germany. Structured as open events, they are lasting from sunset till sunrise and thus following the tangible changes in the electromagnetic spectre. During the performance, a large group of electronic musicians, visual artists and activists, are collaborating on the same spot within the same time frame, intercepting signals from the radio antennae and the satellite dish, re-morphing, sampling and distributing the raw material into an unique and critically positioned visual and audio experience. This tactical media performance is revealing its viewers the shock of an unconventional shift of focus on the immateriality as a signifier of an enormous source of human manipulation.

ARTICLE TEXT

"The electromagnetic spectrum is an immaterial field with very material consequences, and unfortunately it has become a serious commodity."(1)

STATE-OF-THE-ART

After the 9-11, the political justifications of even more sensible and pervasive systems have been multiplied and have caused many discussions concerning the topic of Echelon, the global interception system most probably covering already larger parts of the world. The heightened security in the contemporary world is a result of what we can

openly call the society of surveillance. The ubiquitous layer of the infosphere has been radically restructuring and shifting the established centres of power, the borders between the public and private domains, as well as the general perception on the spatial and temporal dimensions and the hidden, but therefore much more important consequences rising out of these events. One of them is a new world map cartography, the one where physical, psychological or social deterritorialization occurs, a movement which exceeds the geopolitical territories as Deleuze and Guattari have already revealead two decades ago. It is not traversing only the material world but also human subjectivity. A reverse process from that defined by Guy Debord is taking place, the one in which the digitised flow of information has become a commodity and abolishes or undermines the spectacular relation to objects and images. The medium "is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real"(2). Signal Sever!, a recent ongoing performance unit of Slovene art organisation Projekt Atol, is mapping out the acoustic topology of this recent form of the public domain, the augmented space (3) that we inhabit today.

Conceptually and distribution-wise still quite distinct from the business of contemporary visual arts, the contemporary new media artists, acting today as analysts and critics, are creating a fluid field where reflection and awareness about global or local issues can be raised by developing tactical gestures, networked projects and own contexts for their work. "In an era of intensely networked systems, when you create, it's not just how you create, but the context of the activity that makes the product", suggests Paul D. Miller (4). Inheriting from the early 20th century avant-gardists, media artists often produce collectively, in co-operations with other experts. The scientific moment, the one which most of the digital or post-digital culture draws to, actually necessitates such interdisciplinary collaborations. The "madness of ownership"(5) – that traditional fortresses of the stiff borders between us and them, the access and the offline communities, the power and the (neo)colonised – has been mercilessly confronted also by the open source/free software movement. Reciprocal file-, database- and software sharing is challenging the still prevailing notions of art creating as a process of inspiration. Thus created networks and platforms generate a context specific for a work or project, outside the art market and artistic channels of distribution. These expand from documentary, experimental, performative to exemplary, informative and manifestative art events, situations and ongoing structures.

THE CONCEPT IN PROCESS

Projekt Atol, an arts organisation for performances, visual arts, situation and communication fields, was founded in 1992 by Slovenian new media artist Marko Peljhan and his close collaborators, who are coming from multidisciplinary backgrounds of architecture, art theory, computer sciences and electronic music. Peljhan was born 1969 in Sempeter pri Gorici, Slovenia, graduated in theatre and radio directing at the University of Ljubljana. In 1995 he founded the technological branch of Projekt Atol PACT Systems, co-founded Ljudmila (Ljubljana Digital Media Lab) and has since 1996 worked in Ljudmila as a programme coordinator on many different fields. He is also coordinator of the international Insular Technologies initiative and the Makrolab project as well as coordinator and producer of flights for zero-gravity artistic projects in conjunction with the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Moscow.

Peljhan has been evolving many tactical media projects that are probing the use of the information and communication technologies in the field of science and the military industry, our perception of the seemingly evident function of the 'invisible' infosphere, the shifting centres of the power, and strong evidences of the surveillance and civil control that lay behind it. Peljhan's most complex and well-known project-in-progress is Makrolab, a mobile and self-sustainable unit that brings together scientists and artists in an isolated location for a defined period of time. It has been previewed to evolve in the time segments between years 1997 and 2007, and in the space frame of constructions, set up continually in various isolated parts and/or extreme conditions of the world. The first phase was held outside Kassel, Germany, during one of the most prominent contemporary art events, documenta X in 1997. The following phases were located on Rottnest Island in Australia in 2000 and Blair Atholl in Scotland in 2002. The construction of Makrolab follows contemporary architectural laws of the portable, nomad buildings, providing a shelter for an autonomous environment within it, the one that is powered by natural sources of energy (solar and wind power) and is connected with the world through antennas, ISDN, satellite audio and video signals receivers, radio stations, decoding software etc. Using these tools, the team of selected artists, scientists, technicians that can be supported by the lab itself up to one month, undertake the research of the weather systems, telecommunications and migrations, expanding these three general fields onto the acoustics, solar power systems, social evolution systems and strategies, wind power systems, as well as archiving the dreams and the daily routines of each participants. The process of materialisation of the surrounding immateriality is the objective of Makrolab or as Peljhan put it: "… to

transform abstract and intangible qualities and properties present in the world, such as radio waves, atmospheric events or psychic movements into material, 3D structures, documents, objects through a de-abstractisation process…" (6). Existing in a restricted time, defined space and being visible on the Internet through created websites and e-mail correspondence, Makrolab as a utopian model intervenes into the concrete reality, scanning it thoroughly and trying to survive in it. Exactly this isolated/insulated position enables the organism to function as a communication centre and a reflective machine, only this kind of a constructed situation can "produce the code for the evolution of social relations. So, isolated individuals in a restricted space, extended time and intensive communication produce more evolutionary codes in social relations than wide scope political and geographical social movements..." (7).

As a specific extension of the activities within the body of Makrolab research, the performative situations named Wardenclyffe were created and accompanied already the first station in Kassel in 1997. Makrolab operates outside the spectacle, physically remote or at least distant from the urban spaces, it is a place of a production of knowledge and an archive of acquired data, whereas Wardenclyffe performative situations were realised within a more formal and representational frame, presenting the results of the research done within Makrolab. A few hours lasting sound and video performance, acted out together with some other electronic musicians and sound avant-gardists (Aljosa Abrahamsberg, a Slovene sound artist, and the founders of the central German post-techno music label Raster Noton, Olaf Bender, Frank Bretschneider and Carsten Nicolai), happened in the lab itself, combining in real time the documented sound material of the three months' telecommunications research with sampling from the frequency generators and broadcasting talks of the performance crew with the radio operators from the Eastern Europe. The whole soundscape was being intervened with the sounds coming from Andrei Tarkovski's film Solaris that has had the role of giving the time structure of the performance. The sound and the video that were produced live have been broadcast on the Internet, thus bringing the source of Wardenclyffe inspiration, Nikola Tesla's never realised 'world telegraphy' project into a special completion. Tesla's visionary plan of totally interconnecting planetary communication network, fully realised toward the end of the same century, took the shape of the first transmission station, Wardenclyffe Tower on North Shore of Long Island. Soon after it has been put there, between 1901-1903, the plans for finalising the Tower had to be omitted and the Tower destroyed because of the lack of money needed for the project. But Tesla was certain that it could have been a start of the unification of the globe by the flux of

electrical energy that would traverse the world with the flows of language, images and money (8). He achieved in transforming Edison's notion of the electricity as a consumer commodity into a phenomenon of the possibly directed energy into which "everything was transcodable and which could instantaneously intervene anywhere, even to literally occupy the full body of the earth and atmosphere" (9). These and other Tesla's ideas about the principle of the solar radiation and determination and dependence of the human telecommunication activities as well as the quality of the transmission on the day/night cycles, have given the basis for the much more complex and activist performance series, Solar. For the first time it has been organised in the frame of the Ars Electronica festival in Linz, Austria, in 1998. Now detached from its centre unit, Makrolab, it featured a whole stage with operative equipment of four telecommunication towers, the transformators that had the role of the light bearers, information collectors, sound transmitters and basis of antennae systems of receiving. Following the events in the electromagnetic spectrum according to the tangible changes in the ionosphere which have a lot to do with Sun activity content- and interference-wise and present this immateriality as a acoustic and performative experience, Solar started at the sunset at 8 pm and ended at sunrise at 6 am. This time there were even more musicians and the musical partiture was open to hold twelve various fields of activities, from the basic tracing of the sounds of the "Sun", to classical DJing. Each of the performers was leading one of the fields, according to their own interest and knowledge. Already existing compositions, like Signal Territory No. 1, edited by Random Logic and Marko Peljhan in 1997 and comprised of intercepted signals and conversations from the Inmarsat satellites (10), were followed by a field of audio and video interceptions from the meteorological satellites, where the images of news, the reporter's waiting to get online, and all other kinds of visual data, together with audio signals are being transmitted. The video imagery was mastered by Brian Springer who later edited the material into a form of documentary videos. As the horizon of the signals differs from hour to hour, the interception draws from either satellites or atmosphere, each time also revealing the subtle changes of intercepted telecommunications' content. Signal Sever!, the last in the series of Projekt Atol's performances, was premiered in 2001 at the Art+Communication festival in Irbene, Riga, where the radio telescope, a short--wave antenna -- dish of International Ventspils Radio Astronomy Centre is located (11). In 2002 it was performed at the Gwangju Biennial for Contemporary Art in South Korea, at Tramway in Glasgow, Scotland and in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The Signal-Sever! features live electronic music and signals interception, specific signals processing and image distribution systems. Its signals unit is a sensor array and a processing unit which receives radio waves, processes, transforms them and sends them back in many different directions and forms. Within the

generated compositions, many of the resources that Projekt Atol and associated projects have gathered in the last nine years of activities, are being combined. The so called open and close fields are even more defined, and the number of the participants even wider. Along the regular Slovene collaborators of Marko Peljhan (Aljosa Abrahamsberg, Tomaz Sustar, Dr. Ivol, Random Logic, Dr. Webber, Izzo) and the German electronic musicians Olaf Bender and Frank Bretschneider, in Ljubljana there were performances of Laurent Pernice, Kodwo Eshun and Matthew Biedermann as a visual artist included, offering a diverse spectrum of interpreting the transmitted material.

POLITICAL SONIC PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

The Situationist 'detournement' (see note 7) is one of Marko Peljhan's aspiration that he endeavours to be reflected through his projects. Through the series of sound performances Wardenclyffe, Solar and Signal Sever!, always approaching the thin borders between the existing polarities of legal/illegal, private/public, access/surveillance, the Makrolab activities have been extended into the acoustic sphere and started to address the notion of what could be called the political sound mapping. The Situationist movement presented the results of their drifting through cities and registering the effects of the geographical setting on the mood and behaviours of the citizens in the form of psychogeographical maps, collages of various tables, charts and maps. Borrowing the term from the Situationists, American radical theorist Hakim Bey developed the idea of psychotopographical zones inside the real world cartography or digital web (12). On-line communities like the political-, media- or culture activists are using digital networks for communications, political work and strategies. Bey is explaining it in connection to the fact that every single square centimetre of Earth is already owned by some state since beginning of 20th century. If the abstract map of Earth is completed, then the 'temporary autonomous zone' is open. The psychtopological map, based on human consciousness and digital web of communication, emotions, interaction, functions as an index of places with potential that might burst into temporary autonomous zones. Their basic goal is finding a space and time to avoid the pressure of the mass media and political surveillance, as well as expressing the danger of accepting them as a norm.

Translating all the information and energy streams that surround us and could otherwise not be heard or viewed, thus not a part of our realities or consciousness, into a perceptible and mentally highly provocative event of various forms of visual and audio experiences, the process of Signal Sever!'s sound mapping also probes the relationships between the accumulated data and its intrinsic messages. The performance certainly confronts its viewers with the shock of an

unconventional shift of focus on the immateriality as a signifier of an enormous source of human manipulation. It means a step further away from the formalist post-minimalist, post-digital laptop electronica in which the listeners were made hear the inaudible software glitches, skips, clicks and cuts. In a way, these performances move in the opposite direction of such electronic music tendencies that Achim Szepanski described as producing "sensorial shocks and shake-ups rather than meaning and sense effects… Whereas machines transmit information and signals, which contain and relay the information of other machines, meaning is a temporary, codified condition that fills the gaps between these modes of information (13). " Taking the obviously activist aspect of the performances that use the 'aether' as a material and the computers, satellites, antennae and radio equipment as tools, we could also talk about Projekt Atol's practice of orbital perceiving. As Lisa Parks introduces, the 'orbital viewing' is a critical practice, involving an imagined spectatorial position that can glance both at the planet and towards deep space. She suggests that an alternative view is possible, which goes beyond the traditional appropriation by the state, scientific community or corporation. Orbital viewing, instead of notions of 'big brother' offers possibilities for other social formations and interests to become aware of the use and power implications of satellite technologies. "Orbital viewing offers several critical interventions, then. First, it involves the politicization of orbital platforms -- that is, the recognition that the earth's perimeter is now a conduit for thousands of orbiting information machines that produce knowledges that are immediately relevant to social and political struggles on the earth. Second, orbital viewing assumes that it is possible to develop a critical and self-reflexive scrutiny of practices on earth that occur on global, national and local scales. It's not necessary -- or even desirable -- to achieve an objective, neutral distance from those activities in order to see and analyse them adequately. Rather, orbital viewing attempts to occupy satellite vantage points in order to make visible the operations and effects of a constellation of invisible knowledge machines. Third, orbital viewing is not about eliminating satellite technologies. Instead, it's about struggling over how they have been and should be used. It's about questioning who controls, regulates and accesses orbiting machines that are integrally involved in the organization of time, vision, history and culture. (14)"

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2. J. Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", in: B. Wallis (ed.), Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 278.

3. L. Manovich, The Poetics of Augmented Space: Learning from Prada (www.manovich.net, 2002).

4. K. Jordan and P. D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, Freeze Frame: Audio, Aesthetics, Sampling, and Contemporary Multimedia (www.rhizome.org, 2002).

5. N. Bourriaud, "Under the Cultural Rain", in: Frequenzen [Hz]. Audiovisuelle Raume (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2002) p. 136.

6. Marko Peljhan, Insulation/Isolation Proceedings (makrolab.ljudmila.org/reports/marko.html, 1997).

7. Ibid. Hereby Peljhan deliberately connects an important reference to his approach, the one practised by the French group of radical thinkers from the 60ies, the Situationists. Their aim of inventing the situations and studying the effects of the geographical setting was to conceive a 'detournement' in the consciousness of an individual, acting directly on his/her mood and behaviour.

8. J. Crary, "The Eclipse of the Spectacle", in: B. Wallis (ed.), Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 283.

9. Ibid.

10. This composition has been released on the Slovene experimental--electronic music label Rx:Tx in 2002.

11. This formerly top--secret military object (of d = 32 m) is nowadays available not only for scientists -- radio astronoms and radio amateurs, but also for artists.

12. H. Bey, T. A. Z., The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism (New York: Autonomedia, 1985).

 13. A. Szepanski, "Digital Music and Media Theory", Parachute (Electrosons_Electrosounds), No. 107, p. 27 (2002).

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