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Projected Visions. From art in the urban context to fiction and dystopia

The exhibition consists of nineteen videos/films, bound to the theme of urban and public space in their everyday dimension but also in its utopic and dystopic aspects. Through the period of twenty years, Slovenian artists have tackled the topic with most diverse formal, technological and aesthetic approach. The entry is marked by the exhibition, whose main concept was 'art in the urban context'. Next, several video projects that have played an important role in establishing a city as a historical event or aesthetic phenomenon follow as well as those that highlight the experience of a (technologically equipped) urban walker. A special emphasis is given to video works dealing with everyday life, taking place at the intersection of public and private. The selection from the DIVA Station Video Archive – a project by SCCA-Ljubljana, Center for Contemporary Arts – concludes with the works of futuristic anti-utopian fiction and dystopia of the unstable world of conflicts and discomfort.

Public space and art

In 1994, Rem Koolhaas wrote his text *Generic City*, as a metaphor against the unproductive attitude of resistance to the global metropolis and uncontrollable wave of contemporary urbanism. He points out the contradictions of the global city identity, the oblivion of its history, the power of its infrastructures, and its lack of culture. However, the culture, he claims, has its role in a generalization of the city. When the city turns out to be empty and loses its identity and specifics, the public space and culture play the role of consolation: in attempts at its resuscitation, public art is everywhere to cover the void.

In 1994, the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts in Ljubljana conceived the exhibition *Urbanaria*, whose main concept was 'art in the urban context'. In the following three years, 13 selected projects were realised at inner and outdoor places throughout the city. They were linked to the physical substance, history, context, memory, reality of the city as if to contribute precisely to its identity. They were almost unnoticeable and unspectacular: tiny temporary interventions into the urban environment. Their power laid in their non-material capacity to nestle within the cultural consciousness of society and the individual. Could we see the role of *Urbanaria* in the framework of a consolation? Maybe, but its more essential role was that it institutionalised a category tied to the creation of a site specific and conceptual exhibition outside the realms of conventional exhibition sites. The city appeared in two roles: it represented the content linking the projects and it was the place in which the work of the artists was displayed. The projects were not simply conditioned by the setting itself; instead they created a potential space for action, communication and reflection.

The metaphor of a generic city could be applied sooner to a brand new city built soon after the WW2, e.g. Nova Gorica that was constructed in Slovenia close to the border with Italy. As presented in the film **Town in a Meadow**, the city as a common place was not easy to construct, but even harder it was to develop the human bounds. The inhabitants were searching for identity along the borderline of two twin cities: Gorica/Gorizia, the old one, with a heavy burden of history and Nova Gorica with generic settlements and kitschy casinos. In time, the cities have slowly lost the notion of border even before its actual withdrawal. Few days before the declaration of the independence of Slovenia, in summer solstice of 1991, Nova Gorica became an open-air stage for a passion spectacle **Bellum contra solem**: a performance in a generic settlement in front of a two-thousand person audience surprisingly announced what was about to come.

Places and non-places

In the world today, there are more and more non-places, as Marc Augé would call them: they have no history, no symbol, no memory, and no relations on which identity could dwell.

Nowadays, the European city centres are not surprising anymore: they have become a combination of an open-air museum and kitschy decoration, shops and services. The streets are not empty, but they are almost dead, there is usually no traffic, no happening, and no communication. It is time for free style. For urban flâneur, for artist, a performer.

The perception of a space like a non-place, however, is strictly subjective, reveals Augé: each of us in his or her own way can see the same place as a non-place, or as a crossroads of human relations. The traveller's space may well be the archetype of non-place coupled with anthropological spaces as represented by **In 8 Minutes around the World**, a personal travelogue with shots from various places in the world. We are witnessing the series of images whose poetic dimension is related to our ability of remembrance, emotion and imagination. A stable rhythm that runs through the video unifies all different scenes and brakes the seeming symbolic differences. In **Portable Home**, the artist integrated the social context and the dimension of the individual into her campaign, showing that the city cannot be the place for all if it is not the place for everybody – if it is not a place that we can travel through. Similarly, **The Unnoticed**, a series of urban choreographies surprised and provoked the passers-by in frame of strictly regulated city behaviour. As if a connection between public space and performers' behaviour in the city could make a difference. Today, when a network of means of transport is considered an important element to understand the contemporary city, its spatial, time and relational aspects, video **Big Blue Subway** shows that the city subway can be the place and non-place at the same time, a world of temporality and transience as well as a shelter with the possibility of autonomy and solitude.

From monuments to audio-visual media

Monuments are early modes of mass communication and audio-visual media could well be their modern heirs. Equipped with camera and microphone, **Ana Čigon** with her colleagues, strolled along the rows of monuments in Ljubljana: what she saw were only the ones dedicated to male historic figures. In the animations, it was possible to construct her own variation of the facts, to refresh the memory and transform the monuments. After large sections of urban life moved to cyberspace, digital media became essential. With an aspiration of founding an autonomous medium, which could have been carried out during the transition to digital television signal, **Sašo Sedlaček**, proposed to occupy a part of the newly released spectrum of the 'public frequencies' before it falls prey to capital, and allocate it to art and culture. Unsuccessfully. Another area of particular interest in relation to digital aesthetics has been disruptive uses of the technology that turn things upside down: introducing error and noise into the codified world of protocols and interfering with or altering the signal, either mechanically with magnets or instrumentally with synthesizers and computers. This concept of 'interference' and 'glitch' underpins **Singing Bizovik Bridge** video: the artists applied the functionality of the urban structures for their audio-visual experimentation and the result doubles through spectators on the internet.

The image of the city

Marc Augé notes that the urban crisis is actually a crisis of the notion of modernity that makes the city more and more difficult to imagine. The city has become an abstract collage of shots

and transformations in **An Autumnal Still Life**, where poetic impressions, electronic textures and music make contemplative atmosphere. Instead of specific memories, the associations the video mobilizes are memories of memories: reflections on the artist's early video practice. **Nataša Prošenc Stearns** creates a meditation between intimate and public or closed and opened space. From a high building, when she is estranged from the city, it can become an aesthetic phenomenon: in the night time, a network of highway transport seems like a poetic dance of colourful lights. Similarly, the urban noise and reflection of the city lights in the window enters a personal space, combined with white noise of the TV without a signal.

The world of the image

The desire to create a space where the sense of place and the freedom of non-place are connected can be utopian today, says Augé. **Marko A. Kovačič** has tried to implement it with non-humans and ambiguous life in his fictional view from the future to the cataclysmic past. He is questioning the present through designing the civilization of Plastos. Is it utopian or anti-utopian perspective? It remains to be figured out by the viewer. If the Plastoses are to be the only survivals in the world, why wouldn't they just have the right to appropriate and adapt the knowledge and the memory of humans?

In times when the confidence in the credibility of means of communication has been shattered, we cannot be sure what is less deceiving: reality or fiction. It could well be that the only world today is the world of the image and the endless contradictions of various interpretations prove the richness of the city of today. At the same time, such a condition 'subjects the individual consciousness to entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude' as displayed in video **Lumino Auro**, a palimpsest that we can comprehend through Augé's idea of 'non-places of supermodernity'. The video causes anxiety and discomfort, presenting a dystopic present: a frenetic media and still life. The format of video image changes, the view multiplies, and the clock is counting as fast as our mind has to respond to any threat without a hesitation.

In some way, claims Hans-Ulrich Obrist, art is always disobedient. Artists can take the liberty of leaping and the possibility for distance. Consequently, artworks are not here to tell us to obey – they make us stop and pause and not forget.

Sources

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