ART AND TECHNOLOGY - YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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Art in our time is questioning itself. The questioning is its last vitality, a capacity to open itself to alternatives between search and research, between reaction and making sense. That is its methodological problem, and in extreme analysis an ideational one too. Art has been caught by scientific and technological reality in which it does not see any orientation. Its own means are dimensionally inadequate to present-day world happenings. Therefore only in relation and confrontation with the current patterns of social values art can find its social function, but should not remain outside the context of scientific-technological organization. On the contrary, art should be putting the question of what is the ultimate purpose of science and technology just like the questioning of its own purpose and sufficiency.

The insufficiency of art for its genuine function results from its technical incapacity to withstand the universality of civilizational phenomena and in the same time to overcome the embedment in still localized social surrounding, mentality and structure.

The question of art today concerns also its ability to surmount the mere phenomenological level of its own nature in relation both to means and to typology of thinking. As regards the means art is far-away from the contemporary technological potential. Regarding the way of thinking it oscillates between infantile non-conformism and conformist involvement in alienating market processes.

These were introductory theses of my presentation at the Colloquium Art and television, during the XX AICA General Assembly in Bordeaux, exactly thirty years ago. I would like to re-examine the relevance of these considerations for present-day circumstances.

1. The essential processes

In early 60s Zagreb city was renowned as the center of international movement New Tendencie(s). A series of biannual exhibitions of unusual objects, constructions and kinetic installations presented there together with very vivid participation of young people of different self-organized groups of "researchers" throughout Europe and beyond, made extremely plausible the attitude that the notion of art had to endure decisive change. "Nous en avons assez de faire des tableaux pour l'éternité poussiereuse des musées ... tout nouveau matériau, tout nouveau procédé, tout nouvel appareil peut être retenu, dans la mesure ou il serait nécessaire à notre travail ... nous voulons être libres de toute convention ... mais notre mouvement n'est pas révolutionnaire ... nous ouvrons des portes et notre programme croît à chaque nouvelle expérience ... "* wrote Swiss Karl Gerstner in the catalogue of the Paris collective exhibition of over fifty members of that movement in 1964. Being deeply involved in that activities, I personally believed that research approach implicitly presupposes penetration in dominant social structure. How art is to be qualified for that scope - that was the real question.

"Mais déjà les machines sont venues à l'homme plus vite que l'homme n'est venu aux machines"** - Abraham Moles declared at the opening of the Zagreb international Colloquy Computers and Visual Research in August 1968. Moles, one of very rare scientists who

highly appreciated our endeavors, was convinced that with arrival of computers the gap between artist and machine had been bridged over. Consequently he believed the relations between art and society were on the way to be radically changed. He did not care very much for the significance of the dramatic 1968 social happenings.

But some participants of that colloquy did. Two positions were clearly contrasted, both divided in itself, and I tried to make a synthesis of them. First was Alberto Biasi's of the Italian Gruppo N from Padua. "Noi non possiamo rimanere indifferenti al vostro programma e, d'altra parte non possiamo (di) non tener conto delle situazioni reali in cui si trova il mondo economico capitalista"***, he said. The second position was indicated by Frieder Nake, artist/scientist from Rechnenzentrum Stuttgart Germany who replied to Biasi."You know very well how great are dangers of computer manipulation... but we have to hold the principle: rationality in service of man... and be ready to be schizophrenic".

Concluding my intervention I said: " ... the essential processes in the modern society, regardless of the distinction what is a social and what is a scientific or a technical revolution, do converge to each other ..."

2. Under the blanket

It was the time of Marshall McLuhan's preaching on media and global village, many years before the appearance of the first personal computers. "It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the working of media" - was his principal message, which sounds so simplifistically today. Television was the most prominent technology then but we had never understood enough its social working. Probably the same could also be said for our understanding of McLuhan's thought. What he considered to be the most important were the environment changes as consequences of new technologies. Environment is not only a passive wrapping but an active process which provokes structural changes in human views. To be able to face the data of electric speed in a typical situation of saturation with information, we have to turn to study of configurations. This is not the world of wheels but of electric circuitry any more, it is not the world of fragments but of integral contours. He was not so much a false prophet as his prophecy was untimely for practical relevance, because always "politics offers yesterday's answers to today's questions".

In the meantime the idea of global information infrastructure has become more real. There is the possibility of sending and receiving text, numerical data, voice and visual images separately or as combined contents in digitalized form through expanded and interlinked telecommunication and/or broadcasting channels from an individual communicator to another. That is why the intention of Helsinki University professor Ilkka Heiskanen to deal more directly with the problems of creativity and culture within the broader ramification of the "information age" seemed reasonable. What he discovered is surprising enough (or not at all!). Enhanced interactive communication in real time can also have negative economic and political consequences: increased uncontrollability of aggregate behavior, as the events in political life and financial world witness to.

These negative externalities, and instabilities have gradually tightened international cooperation and control of the applications of communication and information technology. An electric blanket spread over the post-industrial world. This blanket is fastened down by scientific and technological pegs on the one side and by economic and legal pegs on the other.

It does not provide only "warmth" for the sleepers but also dreams and images of reality. The disturbing question is about its contents: to what extent it as a whole or its component parts, define and delimit the free purposes and wishes of their creators and receivers.

Heiskanen explicitly expressed his deep concern regarding the interaction between technology and the arts so much hoped for. The relation between them seems more asymmetric now than it was in the 1960s and in the 1970s. There is no prospect for an impact of the arts on technology any more.

3. Don't be afraid!

Was it a well founded hope? How could the arts influence technologies? Is there any relation of direct causality between them? Was not it one of many modern illusions?

An investigation of critical sociocultural issues must consider the involvement of technological "advances" into various cultural spaces or institutions. Although technology and science may be everywhere, there is no determinism anywhere, if by determinism we signify a one-to-one correspondence between the causal agent and its effects. Technology, rather, inheres in all these regions, practices, and ideologies, say Michael Menser and Stanly Aronowitz, proposing a theory of complexity as their opposite to determinism. Technology, science, culture - these categories have lost their disciplinary and ontological integrity, because each of them is permeated and penetrated by the other two. What technologies have made explicit is that cultural boundaries have always been more or less permeable. Cultural objects both transmit cultural beliefs and practices yet remain indeterminate.

Still more radical is Bruno Latour's insight. He, in his still not famous book *We Have Never Been Modern,* says that cultures - different or universal - do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only basis for comparison.

The Menser and Aronowitz's final conclusion is that a subject cannot be defined simply as a human being. To be a subject is to be natural-cultural-technological. Both subjectivity and agency are wrapped up in technological systems.

But, don't be afraid! The Universal of cyberculture has no centre and no guideline. It is empty, without any particular content. It admits all contents, since all it does is put any one point in contact with any other. The general interconnection process is already having and will continue, Pierre Levy is absolutely convinced, to have immense repercussions in economic, political and cultural life. Certainly.

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Quotations translation:

* "We are fed up with paintings for dusty eternity of museums ... every new material, every new process, every new facility is welcome, if it is neccesary in our work ... we want to be free from all conventions ... but our movement is not revolutionary ... we open the door and our programme grows with every new experience ... "

** "But machines have come to man faster than man has come to machines"

*** "We cannot remain indifferent to your programme, but, on the other side, we cannot but to take account of the real situation of the capitalist economic world."