

To Spite Homunculus

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At the same breathtaking speed at which tools and the production of tools is becoming more and more intelligent, Man is being turned into the technicalized product of his own Promethean hubris. Not damned to liver-recycling, but to a post-modern freeze dance. In the midst of fireworks conjured up from trial and error, consisting of lost chronology and decontamination instead of progression. Damned to turning somersaults between aesthetics and anaesthetics, to a Punch and Judy show in which the "Is-Everybody-Ready?" sounds as cynical as fashionably critical commercials for detergents claiming that techno-styled kit-type detergents will produce 40% less burden on the environment. Less of what?

The theme behind Vollert's slot machines is the bizarre reality within a connotation space made up of interaction pessimism, techno-aesthetics and misanthropy.

In the foreground there is neither the material value of the slot machines nor the operation process, as neither form nor function differs from the aesthetics of a gambling arcade where spotty-faced kids lose themselves, tron-like, in a simulated world of games with turbo joysticks. To claim that media art or interactive art "A priori" contains a thrust of evolution, an avantgarde shock is naive, positivistic and an expression of machine utopia. How is the "active viewer" supposed to grow up into a true participant (P. Weibel) if the program of the interactive work of art mutates participation to become pseudoparticipation, I wonder? If everything is as set as the digital alarm clock waking up the digitalized worker at the "Exact Overkill Time" (this appears as an LED display at the moment of program start, i.e. also at the moment of a nuclear arms attack on the machine called "I must always have the last word"), digital control systems to guide him through local traffic so that he can push his magnetic card through the check-in-clock in time to report for work at his CIM station. It is not the machines themselves that are aesthetical carriers of signs, but the interaction between Man and the Machine and the meta-communication on this relationship.

The three machines "Are you a professional smoker?", "Test your reaction!" and "I must always have the last word" belong to a cycle of 6 machines, to date, designed and built between 1984 and 1990 by W. Vollert. The machines are very similar to each other in form. They are ready for use and operate by inserting a coin.

In the case of "Are you a professional smoker?", the professional smoker who, of course, is not distinguished by this, must press in as many cigarette lighters as possible within a set period of time. As the computer controls that he does not press in more than one at a time, he becomes the victim of some evident entropy. From the very start, it is impossible to carry out the LED display's request to press in all one hundred lighters, as the cigarette lighters jumping out are subject to different heat-up rates. The user will realize that after a short while. But the Ego on the apparatus grows pale if set against the drive to play and the PC users fanaticism to control the machine. The task remains unsolved. During the period of use, the participant is situated in a power-inverted Machine/Man system. As in Lems robot fairy tales where the kinky robot magicians, Trurl and Klapaucius, want to constantly belabour pale-lings and water-lings with loathing and disgust, the slot machines take control over the pale inserters of DM 1 coins, for a few minutes. Happening precisely in a process of increasing losses in I-O order, i.e. cigarette lighters pressed in and jumped out, which can only be put right again by work, by human work, this is a fascinating reversal of roles. The machine, characterized as order materialized by scientists in white coats with black horn-rimmed glasses, becomes the producer of chaos, while the user takes up the part of ordering reason, totally in contrast to this bio-plan.

But, however close-knit the Man/ Machine system in "Are you a professional smoker?" may be, it is surpassed by the intimacy provided by "Test your reaction!" The user, who one is almost tempted to call a compulsory participant, is requested by computer outputs, LED displays, to introduce a phallic metal object into plastic vaginas as quickly as possible and they light up in a random sequence controlled by the computer. After the program has run through, the user receives a rating of this penetration speed, of the type issued by "test your strength" machines. By performing the socially taboo act of penetrating in the public environment of an exhibition, even with substitutes, the penetrator is suffocated in a vortex of relations between sign systems. The divisions between model and reality are sacrificed to pleasure, the pleasure of playing. The Eternal He becomes both victim and perpetrator of patriarchal sex/power fantasies.

Interaction proceeds on two different sign levels. On the one hand, there is the interaction between Man and Machine, which is characterized by the irreversible power differential of Machine vs. Man, because the interaction is simulated by the program for the purpose of 'real' pseudo-participation and although the participant can influence the result, he will only receive his LED praise by helplessly surrendering to the machine.

At the same time, however, the use of the machine is also a model of sexual use. Sex becomes a form of communication, the aesthetic appeal is reduced to a sexist one, the relationship between Man and the Machine is considered as libidinous interaction, the relationship Man/Woman is put on a level with the relationship Man/Machine in a violent subject/object relationship.

Therefore, what is actually tested in the case of "Test your reaction!" is not the way of using the machine but the participants reaction, as is suggested by the ambivalent title. If the participant wishes to evade the test that lies hidden behind the surface, he must not participate at all, as he is at the same moment degraded to an agent of an interaction process characterized by asymmetrical power structures, and thus to a zombie-like robot. The reactions of people concerned show that they will behave in a more mechanized way than the very machine. In contrast to the avantgarde ceremonies of provocation provided by the Democratic-Western-Post-Basic-Supply-Culture, the provocative artist human Vollert, who expressly wants to test reactions, is substituted by the art machine which in turn reels off computer-managed mechanics – LOAD (ok). The marketing strategists of the vacuum-cleaner culture depend on provocations supplied by sub- and subsub-culture. Just as Vollert makes potentially critical aspects visible only in the form of ambiguous signs of different connotation levels, intermediary aesthetics must reduce marketing mechanisms to absurdity by twists and distortions, not by criticism from 'outside' which in fact has never been outside. This is made particularly clear in the case of the machine called "I must always have the last word".

In the case of "I must always have the last word", various parameters from the outside world (radioactivity, temperature, air humidity, etc.) are continuously measured in order to start five firework rockets in the event of a nuclear weapon exploding near the slot machine. After inserting a DM 1 coin, the real thing can be simulated on an LED display, right to the start of the five rockets. Unless the slot machine is dismantled, it will remain impossible to check whether the machine really measures the above-mentioned parameters regularly, and whether the rockets would really start at the "Exact Overkill Time". It is of no significance to the user, as he will never be able to falsify it. Totally dependent on the meta-medium of television, he will likewise never be able to prove the reality of the Gulf War events, which being the first global real-time media war, only became historical the moment they were televised. A worldwide spectacle of non-information, of "aesthetics of disappearance" (Virilio). The fact that what can be made is beyond imagination, and yet the slot machine is so handy, the toy rockets so close at hand and the LED so very impressive, makes one shiver, like the gentle fascinating tremour that we TV spectators felt when video shots taken from the tip of a so-called intelligent weapon were shown by CNN.

This is how the metaphor of control becomes a game process of almost tragic dimension, with this machine. The controlling body of the late 20th century, the military, are trying, in this schizophrenic stalemate situation that is now crumbling, to control the Eternal Other One, the Enemy. Using nuclear arms that can only be kept under control by means of the instruments of information technology. Which, however, are impossible to control at the Exact Overkill Time due to the speed of modern warfare and the complexity of the information acquisition apparatus. The participant cannot control the machine which is supposed to recognize whether an out-of-control state is beginning. The dilemma of registering reality by observation can be experienced most impressively.

In the science fiction literature of the fifties, machines went out of control because they became too intelligent, i.e. too human. In Wild West style, some mixture between Sherlock Holmes and John Wayne would usually bring these thinking, suddenly emotional machines under control again. But thinking apparatus has become a feature of everyday life. The nightmare of virgin procreation gives way to a different "angst". It is not the individual machine that goes out of control but the everyday network of TV, PC and programmable coffee machines. The demarcation line between virtuality and reality gives way to a simultaneousness of event. ("We can no longer imagine what we can start". Günter Anders.)

By the ambiguity of the signs used, the indissoluble interaction between violent opposition to machines and technoaesthetics and the overlapping of interactive relationships, Werner Vollert's slot machines make it clear that "Out of Control" cannot be the status description for a single machine, but rather the stigma of our age. As the global quality of information increases exponentially, every model of explanation acquires such a multitude of factors that a Set Actual status check is no longer possible. Neither can "Are you a professional smoker?", "Test your reaction!" and "I must always have the last word" be simply dismissed respectively as a game of skill, sexist or a fairground attraction.