For a Digital Renaissance of Situationism
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Nothing goes without saying anymore. At least not much, to put it a bit more cautiously. And technology-based art is misunderstood by many people anyway. Of course, there are a lot of different reasons for that. But it should be pretty obvious — and why else would we even get involved in impassioned discussions like this — that the various forms of technology-based art, along with technological development itself and the effect it increasingly exerts upon everyday life, have gradually oriented themselves upon a single sphere of manifestation — namely, the realm of data. A foreseeable outcome of this is the growing similarity of different concepts of art. For the present, though, the distinctions may still be useful to the extent that, as the argumentation that the supposed diversity of characteristics manifested by art proves itself to be invalid, new conditions can be derived.

Technology-based arts thus have as their prime criteria their respective spheres in which they manifest themselves and their referential spheres. We speak, for example, of the informational (mediatized) sphere by which we mean, in reference to media art, the forms of appearance and distribution of informational media which are organized as a monologue and include newspapers, TV, etc. In contrast to this informational sphere, we speak of a sphere of signification as that of traditional management as well as the management of signs, of orientation, of politics — with signifiers such as legislature, art, society, morality or spectacle. Situationism, anti-art, art in public spaces or spaces to be made accessible to the public base their oppositional attitude upon this distinction as one of aesthetics as well. Dialogically organized communications media and channels establish linkages with the data sphere — in reference to communicational (or telematic) art.

We take media art to mean either art which employs technical equipment to produce (and reflect) images, sounds or texts, or we refer thereby to art which conceives itself as a form of game played with informational media. This intention describes, for example, the strategy pursued by Malcolm McLaren in the late 1970s. And this is what music theorist Werner Jauk is referring to when he interprets the punk rock/media art project "The Sex Pistols" by Malcolm McLaren as the consequence of "precisely these 'theoretical concepts of authenticity' commercially blown out of all proportion." McLaren "showed how oppositional attitude is sold as a commodity of the rock 'n' roll business in a giant 'swindle'" in which he "made the exploitation of the media's trade in 'oppositional attitude'" his own strategy: "It's not the media exploiting musicians, but rather artists exploiting the media, selling extreme oppositional attitudes through the mechanism of the 'media rock 'n' roll business' which otherwise so masterfully disables oppositional attitudes to consumption goods. This process is dissected and documented in The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle in which the document itself is likewise declared a commodity: ringing up a double sale or parallel theoretical elaboration befitting of art, a method of attaining insight."

Proceeding from the example of McLaren's "media art", communicational art manifests itself as a form of play that organizes art in the dialogical data sphere by bringing together this data sphere with the technical means of (digital) communication. Assuming that interactive art derives none of its concepts from a connection to traditional conceptions of art which it turns into a plaything, it is, in my opinion, nevertheless based upon the same principle pattern.

What significance can possibly be attained by an interactive art that does not aspire to be a plaything? Usually, it's just something that consumers buy — either on credit or on faith. As a form of art, however, it raises the question of an expanded conception of art — and usually

dismisses it peremptorily, when one considers how interactive art invariably follows mass consumer demand.

As a basic precondition, expansion of the conception of art automatically calls for a process of distancing from or a rejection of art's claims to autonomy. The discourse on the subject of art in public spaces was marked by this when it did not simply content itself — did it make us feel somewhat ill-at-ease? — with negotiating formal criteria of the locations at which it might properly appear. The question of expansion has been constantly influenced by the interpretation of the realm into which art could, in a concrete sense, expand.

Implicit in the self-conception of traditionally defined art, meant here in the sense of diverse artwork-producing disciplines, is the endorsement of its traditional sphere of manifestation, the endorsement of the contexts of distribution, administration and exploitation to which art is subject. Even the critique leveled by traditional art at the locations where it appears — the institution of the gallery, for instance — contains an implied endorsement of the "gallery" as a manifestational site, since the sphere of the gallery is not identical to the gallery for which a specific aesthetic form has been executed. A work of art, then, is an expression of the acceptance of the preconditions of its manifestation if every form of manifestation, including the critique upon it, submits to these preconditions. The conception of a work of art signifies a form of submission that can be consummated only in the work itself.

All forms of manifestation have one thing in common: the problematic issue of autonomy. In most aesthetic theories, autonomy is understood in the sense of Kant (1) who introduced Autonomie as a philosophical concept. For example, Niklas Luhmann summarized his considerations on the subject of modern art by stating "that art attains a state of freedom from external constraints to the extent that it rejects delimiting restrictions and achieves self-liberation, and its very pretensions to being art are dependent upon how this is done". And for Adorno, autonomy is only then attained when all traces of the human imprint upon form have been completely dissolved: "The purer the forms and the greater the autonomy of works, the more horrible they are. Appeals calling for a more humane attitude by works of art, for a greater degree of adjustment toward human beings as their virtual public regularly tend to dilute quality and weaken integrity of form." If, however, the work (as "categorical imperative" of art) is obsolete, so then is the concept of autonomy — which this author has never felt comfortable with anyway. Something is either autonomous or it is not. Gradual autonomy is conceptual nonsense. There exist, at best, forms of dependence which can approach autonomy.

The question of the meaning as well as of the quality of art is initially posed as a question of the interpretation of the spheres of its manifestation (through its appearance therein). This leads to an expansion not only of the conception of art but also of the concept of diverse spheres. Art no longer defines itself through the interpretation of the narrowly defined space in which it appears, but rather by means of its expansion into other spaces and the interpretation of them: expansion of urban, social spaces into those which constitute themselves anew as a result of new contexts of function and significance. Above all, the question is how the substitution of the work as a parameter for the concept of art constitutes, through the sphere of its manifestation, a parameter of the meaning and the quality of art.

If, for example, the sphere of art is no longer solely the place of its manifestation but, at the same time, the place where it is produced and distributed, thus both "material" and object of art, as is intended by highly advanced art forms, then we may well have to pronounce as obsolete a great deal more than we, in our traditional love of art, would prefer. I would

therefore like to focus attention upon two forms of art that we have never grown so very fond of: situationism, on one hand, and anti-art on the other. As a result of the traits they exhibit, both forms enable us to carry forward a discourse in which art is conceived to some extent as a phenomenon in a historical context. Admittedly, the failure of both of them is quite evident. The manner in which anti-art once advanced its interpretation of the sphere of established art as a reinforcement of society and assumed the attitude of an obsolete world view is just as inapplicable today as the world view of the situationists. If everything is merely appearance, then so is the situationist critique of the culture of spectacle, for which whatever appears is good including, therefore, the situationist critique of it. And nevertheless, elements are to be found in these attitudes which contribute to our orientation regarding a technology-based art. In their fundamental negation of the character of the work, media art, communicational art and interactive art display parallels to the theory and practice of anti-art and/or situationism. (The character of the work is significant only in the context of the exploitation and administration of art.) But, like anti-art and situationism, the practice of media, communicational and interactive art relegates this element to ineffectuality as well.

Anti-art — both in its classical modernist expressions such as Dada, Fluxus and Viennese Actionism, as well as in the movements in this direction during the 1970s and early 1980s — usually assumed an oppositional attitude to the market, performing what was interpreted as the social corrective of art. It made the attempt to withdraw from the normative as well as politically all-consuming ideology of (aesthetic) liabilities and (personal) assets by abandoning the conception of art as a work of art in favor of the idea that art manifests itself in an event. It thus substituted the concept of the work with that of the Concept. It called into question the myth of the original and the conception of authorship — which indeed made it seemingly incompatible with forms called for by the established channels of exploitation, though its end, as a value in the institutionalized management of works and signs, argues against this view. Anti-art played with the conception of art and the way the bourgeoisie appropriated it for itself as an ideology of confident superiority. The game was played against art itself; that is to say, against its instrumentalization to strengthen an ideology. It was inevitable that it would end up as an artistic value, since this was its very point.

A much more radical approach — and, thus, one that is of even greater interest today — was taken by the situationists of the 1950s and 1960s. Their interpretation was not focused on the instrumentalization of art as a pillar supporting the ideology of a society, but rather upon society as a universal spectacle organized according to the motto "Everything that appears is good and good things are those which appear." Art as understood by the situationists is not something that is produced; it is an attitude out of which situations are construed. If we interpret Meme as something that brings about both an increased attainment of knowledge which is adequate with respect to its environment, as well as the implementation of knowledge (whereby the aim is that it achieve actual form), then situational constructs are a close equivalent — viral effects in the program of sheer appearances. It would perhaps be appropriate for the unification of the attitudes of anti-art and situationism to take effect in the program of the looming unification of spheres (of information and media, of data and signs) into a single monolithic sphere.

As a rule, a work of art is regarded as "interactive" only if it undergoes change as a result of intervention on the part of an actively participating observer. It is the construction of a context that makes possible, in a type of choreographed action, the creation of a work of proximate individuality. This context is the interactional framework as well as the actor and the work itself. Beyond this framework, though, interactivity does not considerably differ from the static work of art. Last and undoubtedly least, the discourse of interactivity leads into that of

traditional art and how this discourse is conducted by means of the significance of color or the pedagogical value of viewing a work of art. Interactivity means neither a gain for art itself nor for the understanding of the spheres to which it as a work refers. Completely within the tradition of the failure of anti-art, interactive art — at its best which is tantamount to saying in the rarest of cases — contents itself with thumbing its nose in defiance of the administrative sphere of art. It mostly reproduces the old ideas in digital format. The creation of an electronic matrix (an artificial system of preconditions in miniature — the dynamics of inversion) which undergoes a framework shift as a result of interactivity basically refers only — though, for contemporary observers certainly in a most interesting way — to the old quality of reference and, for the most part, differs from the interactive in the same way that the Kantian concept of aesthetics ("the Beautiful as an object from which one takes pleasure in the absence of all interests") differs from the assertion made by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who — to now introduce the word "beautiful" in a way that can be intersubjectively checked and approved for subsequent usage — primarily attributed "beauty" not to objects but rather used it to refer to a way of cognition (something can be "cognized in a beautiful way"). One is a form of play within a (larger) form of play exerting an effect upon it (offensive dynamics), whereas the other is comparable to a plaything. Inversion dynamics are analogous to the actions of frameworks. To construct a framework around art, thus to make it subordinate to framework conditions, means to convert it into the status of a work. Art in the data sphere is characterized by the exact opposite, by the dissolution of frameworks. Its own dissolution as art is implicit in this. However, it is only through the conversion of interactive art into the offensive dynamics of communicational art that this dissolution is fully consummated as a transformation into a new form of organization.

In communicational art, context is thus a cultural fact. A venue is not specially created for this form of play; rather, it is set in motion within, and on the basis of the preconditions of, the public sphere. This cultural framework of interaction — at least in the form in which it is perceived — is modified by dynamic users. The portrayal which emerges is the art of usage, whereby "art" is, of course, meant to have a double meaning. Until now, the creation of (aesthetic) information was usually a private affair. The data sphere, however, makes not only the data itself but also the creation of data/information into a public matter. In "Horizontal Radio" (2) for example — a project organized in Internet and distributed internationally through radio hook-up to the net that also included live presentations — music, sound, text and all (including aesthetic) types of information were imbued with a significance totally different from that of their form and content alone. "Horizontal Radio" was an experimental set-up — the first, to my knowledge — in which informational and communicational media were dialogically hooked up, and this to an extent that previously had been formulated only as a utopian fantasy. Reversability was introduced into this process as an aesthetic category of criticism, namely as the critique of information, including the aesthetic information itself, which was propagated, and thus modified, by the channels of communication. The information was processed at each network interface point, so that each user could receive a version different from that received by all other users linked to the net. Thanks to this dialogue, information was subjected to a constant critique. Not only the aesthetic information but also the functional characteristics of radio itself were changed: radio underwent a self-determined process of divergence brought about by the manner of representation and the functional mode into which it was forced. For example, here in Austria, only a portion of the information could be received via radio; other countries got other portions. Only in the net, in the telematic sphere, could the information be received as a whole — and also be subsequently processed. This made possible communication via radio, not just information, such that the monologic authority of the medium was broken down. The aim of criticism is to again impart significance to things. Instead of them giving us meaning, "informing" us,

significance (meaning) is provided to them by means of critique of information. Radio had to be rethought because radio itself had been induced to do so by the process leading to the dissemination of information.

Unified into a contemporary situationism, media art and communicational art are organizing themselves for the interactive construction of communicable situations. "Horizontal Radio" was the first situationist project that has taken into account the changed and changing conditions of our culture.

Interactivity as aesthetic category — namely, in view of the beautiful (in the sense of Baumgarten) way it can be seen to have been fully realized — is pure interface design. its application may some day generate graphics, texts, audio, etc. Its political aspect (the aesthetic category of criticism) is its reversability. Carrying over traditional aesthetic criteria of graphics, texts, audio into the sphere of data means not only acknowledging these structural orders, even with the (ultimately, unfortunately) opposite intention; they are also pure nonsense in this context of function and thought. If the question is posed "What sense does the data sphere make?", then graphics, texts, audio, etc. provide the first answer as the elements which combine to generate this data sphere. This type of interface design had to provoke a new process of questioning leading to a future theoretical, social and cultural foundation of art. Otherwise, following the befuddlement of feelings resulting from the overemphasis upon sensual qualities of perception in traditional art, it is to be feared that only cognitive befuddlement in view of the closed system with its dynamics of inversion will be the consequence.

Notes:
(1) Kant was the first to set out a philosophical-critical treatment of art's claims to autonomy which had emerged in theory and practice in a series of successive steps since the Renaissance. In his view, the power of aesthetic judgment is directed at objects whose beauty is a "form of functionality, to the extent that no evident sense of purpose can be perceived with respect to the object." Here, "beautiful" is defined as that "which, in the absence of an abstract concept, is perceived as the object of essential pleasure." These determinations do not refer to perceived contents but rather to form and proportion that accrue to the work of art as a product of freedom. In reference to beauty as functionality of things (works of art) without purpose, the free play of the sensual power of perception provides the basis of the aesthetic behavior of the subject.
(2) A co-production of Ars Acustica and experts of the EBU with TRANSIT, ORF Landesstudio Tirol, ORF-Kunstradio, ORF Landesstudio Öberosterreich and KAPSCH AG. Concept and project organization: Gerfried Stocker — x-space, Heidi Grundmann — ORF-Kunstradio. "Horizontal Radio" was on the air at Ars Electronica 95 from June 22 at 12:00 CET to June 23 at 12:00 CET on the transmitting frequencies of 24 radio stations.