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InfoWar — The Re-ordering of Things

The everyday reality of the concept "Information Society" still represents a rhetorical project made up of exaggeration, misjudgment and underestimation. It indeed ranks at the top of the current buzzword hit parade, though with the expected outcome of all such processes of inflation: namely, a significance beyond any generally agreed-upon core, with the accentuation of the immaterial at its center.

The need for explanation associated with its usage — in contrast to the term "Industrial Society" — is an indication of its widespread elaboration in vague terms and as mere potentiality; in everyday reality, it is obviously a baseless conception.

Nor is that any further cause for amazement, if everyday reality is merely meant to subsume the spectrum of individual cares, needs, and tangible necessities; a design for living concentrated upon materiality — in the sense of possessions and bodily integrity — since, to put it polemically, Being cumulates in Having and the feeling of existence achieves transcendence in belonging(s).

Even the much-trumpeted structural shift — a consequence of the cultural shift in favor of immaterialities — has crystallized in everyday reality primarily in the form of loss (of a job, an asset, a standard of living); cares and needs are focused on the reattainment of this previously-held status. In the daily doings of politics and the everyday perception of political affairs, the problem of unemployment rates is far more pressing indeed than, for instance, any sort of deep insight into the New Economy — according to which it is possible, for example, to acquire a monopoly on pictures that one does not even possess, and to get (even) rich(er) in the process. It seems as if there is a correlation between the extent to which the shift from the old era to the new one manifests itself in everyday reality, and the degree of distortion in perceiving this new era attributable to a longing for the old order of things. Whereas product-oriented Industrial Society was and is capable of being conceptually nailed down by means of substantial terms, there is a hesitancy and even an inadequate acknowledgment of the very necessity of clearly conceptualizing Information Society, since the evident concreteness is lacking.

"Material loss," the deformation of material in the sense of the deprivation of it, is normally a consequence of a criminal, war-like, or violent — in any case, "tangible" — event. Naturally, in the case of war, its "full-bloodedness" has a much stronger immediacy for those effected by it than the necessity for one to confront the mediation of the war by means of pictures in conformity to the "laws" of information media; the shock and dismay at the sight of these pictures is more immediately present than the consideration of the laws of their mediation. Acts of war and the mediation and perception of them is a field reserved for the elaboration of theories with respect to mediatization, a field which — in comparison to everyday reality — is one of vagueness and potentiality.

With the idea of information warfare, however, the beginnings of the process of actually equating this field with the literal battlefield of war have been put into place. This is a transformation from the mere form of a "theater of war" which, during the Gulf War — the first war staged for the media — still discredited the stylized efforts to attract TV consumers, to the actual target area of acts of war themselves. It is not only that the rhetorical topos mutates into meanings of a downright topographically obligatory nature; even the distance in

everyday reality and the differentiation between those directly affected and those observers who have been affected by their fate has finally become obsolete.

With "InfoWar," Ars Electronica is again staging a festival that represents a realization of the intention formulated in 1996 to shift attention from the expansion of the theoretical framework of possibilities of art, technology and society to correspondences in already-topical manifestations of the interplay of experience and effect. InfoWar exists as a military project and as an economic/political undertaking, just as it does in the form of a projection whose "visibility" is based upon the ways current cultural technology functions.

Since the 1980s — and later spurred on even more by the "successes" of the Gulf War — the development of information warfare has been in full swing. Whereas wars in the past were aimed at the conquest of territory and, thereafter, the control of productive capacity, war in the 21st century will exclusively target the power over knowledge. The fourth front, in addition to warfare on land, at sea, and in the air, will be established within global information systems.

The "field" has become so tangible, so real — so completely substantiated in numbers, implements, budgetary outlays, catastrophes, and examples of the exercise of power and the emergence of resistance movements — that the Information Society no longer represents the vague promise of a better future, but a reality and the central challenge of the here-and-now.

With three key technologies developed in the interest of war and from its logic — electricity, telecommunications and the computer — having made a permanent mark on civil society, these technologies of simultaneity and coherence are now putting this society onto a footing of permanent mobilization. A struggle for markets, resources and spheres of influence is being waged to attain supremacy in processes of economic concentration, in which the fronts are no longer formed by the borders of states or the jurisdictional limits of legal systems, but rather by technical standards; a battle in which the power of knowledge is managed as a lucrative monopoly over its distribution and dissemination.

Parallel to this development, the attention of military strategists is increasingly turning from computer-aided warfare and the enhancement of the efficiency of an army's destructive potential through the implementation of information technology, virtual reality, and high-tech weaponry to cyberwar whose ultimate target is the global information infrastructure itself. On one hand, this is a matter of terminating computer and communication systems, the erasure of data banks, and the destruction of an enemy's command-and-control system; on the other hand, this also has to do with gaining access to civilian information and communication systems in order to exert influence upon the general public. The vital importance of the global information infrastructure for the functioning of international financial markets also necessitates the establishment of new strategic aims: not deletion but manipulation, not destruction but infiltration and assimilation — netwar as the tactical deployment of information and disinformation, whose target is human understanding.

The recent turbulence on stock and currency exchanges has revealed the power of a global market in an unmistakable way — how this could only have come about on the basis of the digital revolution of which this power is the most tangible direct effect. The modern digitally-networked market wields more power than politicians. Governments are losing their say over the international value of their currencies; now, they can no longer exert control, but only react. The economic necessity of building up freely-accessible communication networks on a massive scale imposes severe constraints on the authoritarian restriction of information flows.

The shifting of critical control functions into the realm of responsibility and influence of cybertechnologies places centralized authority structures into a previously unheard-of state of vulnerability and susceptibility to attack. The geographic borders of the Industrial Age are increasingly losing their significance in global politics, and are being displaced by vertical fronts along the lines of social class.

These new forms of post-territorial conflicts have long since ceased being the exclusive domain of governments and their ministers of war and finance. Computer freaks in the service of organized crime, terrorist organizations with high-tech know-how, as well as NGOs, hackers, and — last but not least — artists have become the chief protagonists in the cyberguerilla-nightmares of intelligence agencies and departments of defense.

InfoWar takes place in the sphere of new cultural techniques which are learned and implemented in the most diverse fields of application. Artists, effected both in their functional role and in their self-conception, are thus faced by a particular challenge — the "cultural technicians" who have chosen the information and communication spheres as their field of work on the culture of their society, no less than those who have remained within the conventional "operating system: art" — the former, since they have once again gotten caught between the fronts (thus appearing in nightmares they never dreamed of), and the latter under the impression that this development also leaves behind in everyday reality.

Back in the days of the Gulf War, a consumer of information — for instance, via television, in which a report about the war was running — might well have gotten extremely agitated; since then, the knowledge of the new reordering of things would rather make such an information consumer cognizant of a certain degree of responsibility. And where responsibility previously had to be perceived at best, now that the current level of development is reciprocating back upon the analog environment, it is practically impossible to escape it — at most, it can be ignored. The prospective view of things as an occasion for artists to exchange their aesthetic program for a role (whether as apologist or critic) within the "network of systems" or as an observer of it has meanwhile come to be followed by the current view of things in the same function. Mere excitement as a reaction to the production of, the viewing of, or the interaction with works of art is no longer appropriate to this process of development — unless the perception of the new is distorted by the longing for the old order of things.

This would be an answer to the question that has accompanied the Ars Electronica Festival from the very outset — namely, what does all of this have to do with art?

Another way to answer it would be with another question: what can art have to do with social reality, and should it have anything to do with it?