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Special José Maceda Section

Images

on the cover: Jan Anderzen

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1(utility) 2(dis/embodiment) 3(duals & doubles) 4(topography)
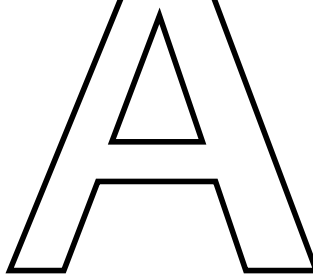
A chim Wollscheid

Place, Art, and Transformation
(Is there a hole in the middle?)

I get the impression that nowadays in art–as in any other cultural branch, be it politics, the humanities, or the different fields of social research–the emphasis is on the feasible. This is surely due to a growing awareness of interdependence, not just on strategic but also on ecological or economic terms, preventing the majority from seeking refuge in utopias, here understood as thought models or theories deriving from the Renaissance scheme of the ideal city "Utopia," the isolated beautiful form opposed to the chaotic conditions of the environment, "projected" not only in terms of time but also in self-displacement.

Instead, intertexturality, networking, and shallow hierarchies prevail and any form of missionary effort seems quite out of place and out of structure. Handling and not transforming (or converting) is the theme of a period which is sometimes more, sometimes less, intensely occupied with the re-modeling of the self through the self (as opposed to a Ziggy Stardust savior)–an errand, non-completable because it is anomic, as well as an uncomfortable time and place for the artist and his job profile, shaped after the heroic prototype of the lone fighter, the ranger, the missionary, or the stormtrooping cavalry ("The James Gang rides again"...). Escapists like the late disciples of the "avant-garde" find their natural limits in the economical net, which somehow paradoxically forces them into a regular job in order to maintain the outsider status ("Now, what exactly would you like to do, Mr. Baudelaire?"). This is no calamity and perhaps not even a development exclusively typical for this period alone. The ongoing process of integration, the disappearance of an "outside," the obvious need to reflect on media not just as a means of transporting a message, but also as an "informing" aspect of communication, somehow necessarily require a re-thinking of the status of the artist's job and work, or, less ambitious, thoughts on how at least some of his abilities could be coordinated with a situation that does not call for the autonomous work and its maker. Now if the outsider status is no issue, should we and how should we try to get inside?

Presuming "in" is the place of common denominator, we find ourselves in the "middle," the place desperately sought after, discussed, and defended by marketing strategies and political parties, placing aside the question of whether artists are the most wanted personnel in this realm and whether the comforts to be found there would be a comfort to the artist personae. We can ponder on the advantages, disadvantages, and probabilities of whether and how instruments that somehow dismember can also help to build, which, as this text deals with art and music, leads us to a consideration of the realm of sound and its spatial manifestations.

Back in the early 80s, when we still went to see rock concerts, my friend used to say, "Let's go to the back, the best sound is in front of the mixing desk." Well, trivial…no big wonder at least, because the mixer or sound engineer in the back of the hall is the kybernos, the navigator in the flood of sound, the invisible (remember Bentham) ear, that hears all and directs the course of hearing that all others have to take. The invisibility of his control coincides with the invisibility of the two PA towers at the left and right of the stage, their stereo equivalent in symmetry with his ears (and, of course, with the spatial distribution of sound: while the listener is fastened to his standpoint or seat, the sound moves in effigy). A clear and simple setting is pretty effective with regard to the satisfaction of the average listener and the average organizer. The system itself moves (from city to city) and the listeners move (in and out with an interruption of maybe two hours), a mostly enjoyable overlapping of motions and emotions.

Nevertheless, this attempt to effectively distribute sound depends on the ability of certain PR-contexts to channel and pique the interest of the listener–a certain number of listeners has to be interested, i.e., fed into the acceptation of a style or branch of music (this is no special edition of a conspiracy theory…I don't believe consumers of different genres of music are seduced or forced into being a choiceless consumer-trap–the decision is on the side of the consumer, it's just a bit directed…).

Now let's imagine this kind of chanelization and selection is out of date (or just can't be accomplished anymore). We enter the age of non-directedness. One space/music-metaphor for this, I imagine, could look like a circle, about 300ft

wide, consisting of stages with bands (maybe about 20 of them in all), each with their own amplification. Between the stages exist conduits of the same size through which the audience moves into the inner ring. In the center of the ring, where everyone can move freely, ia a mixing desk, revolvable with regard to which segment of the sound ring has to be controlled. Let's suppose all bands do a fairly good job–they perform professionally, in a comparable dynamic range, they play more or less mainstream pieces, and they do this all at the same time. Even if he intended to, the engineer at the mixing desk would have a hard time figuring out who's playing what and how to actually set the controls because, of course, all of the sound would interfere and overlap. It would be impossible to discern the single voice of one instrument or control special effects like delay or headroom, to actually pull the puppet strings of the single voice/instrument. The navigator in the eye of the storm has to take care of his position rather than project directions for others. Because the desk now becomes akin to an instrument of a second degree–meaning, in order to discover its function and possibilities under the given conditions, the mixer has to start to experiment. Perhaps he'd begin to change the volume of all sounds with comparable pitch, or raise or lower the level of sounds that have the same dynamics. Maybe he'd start to produce dropouts in more or less rhythmical patterns or silence passages that have a common sonic quality. Or he'd even switch on radical high- or low-pass filters to let only certain sections of the sound spectrum prevail.

Generally speaking, instead of controlling singularities, he would surely start to summarize controls and effects in a way that would allow for an approach of introducing difference instead of reaching a similarity with a preconceived sound-ideal. In other words, while accepting the diversity of the general sonic "background" or source, he'd start to shift levels, which more or less control the presence of sound, its spatial and time-based influence in the momentary flux of sound. What would his feedback be like? As there would be merely summarized effects, the causes would have to be looked at less directly, as in the usual relation linking one voice with one fader. Maybe, instead of actually listening to the changing of the sound profiles, our navigator would start to watch the movements of the audience in the circle. Perhaps he'd discover densities, an amassing of people in certain areas or more or less quick shifts in response to either musical or other causes. The mixer would surely be tempted to read such movements or shifts as an effect of his alterations of sound: a thinning out of the audience in response to dynamics, rapid movements correlating with rhythmical irritations etc…"Sound" in this view would therefore no more be readable as a sonic phenomenon, but rather as a medium, which effects another medium. (Of course the general cacophony of the bands could still be treated as music and even handled in the conventional way. But I think the effects in regard to a change or the creation of difference wouldn't be so interesting…).

Why this complicated and rather awkward metaphor? I'm using it because it's quite difficult to find a fitting example of how to describe the change taking place when shifting the emphasis from artworks that are supposed to prolong the preconceived paths of object-oriented work to a class or artworks that are designed to take part in interactive settings. When trying to describe this change, we have to consider several points which somehow mark or accompany this change. Firstly, object-orientedness doesn't just occur in the usual way to produce "pieces" - be it a painting, a sculpture, a theater play, or a music-piece. It is also part of the identifying mechanism at work in every language: trying to deal with "non-objectified" relations with the help of words thus bears the risk of constant paradoxy. Meaning, the tool we use here (me writing, you reading) is a biased one. Secondly, my "music" metaphor indicates the problem one has to conceive of and to imagine a "non-directed" space. It suffers from the fact that such a space is simply unimaginable - therefore my example seeks refuge in a radial multiplication of the central perspective pattern (the mixer or navigator in the seat of the king, the bands on stage quoting the renaissance idea of total representation... I know all this is far-fetched and poorly discussed... nevertheless...). We simply can't imagine a "non-directed" space as such. Thirdly, and most important, the sheer impossibility of accepting the necessity for art that engages in relation (or in-betweens, so to speak) might stem from our general difficulty in dealing with what I'd call "non-objectified relations". Because we live in what one could call the "age of the obvious" - things or relations which do not "appear", i.e. imprint a shaped, configured image on some surface, tend to pass as non-existent. (Somehow logical, this also seems to influence our perception of "time" - the idea of progress or some steady flow in the advancement of or in time is exchanged with a notion of kaleidoscope succession of more or less independent "appearances"). In consequence, our perceptive apparatus (or "interest") is trained to "grab" visual bits and pieces from a so-called outside, rather than to establish an ecological, two-sided relation: a projective measure that favors response instead of exchange.

In short, works of art that require some discursive interest, position themselves in open, tendentially non- or multi-hierarchical spaces and deal with "invisible" relations which meet conditions that most of those addressed or concerned will not be too familiar with. Somehow understandably, to overcome or out-maneuver this reluctance or reservedness seems to pose one of the more interesting challenges for some contemporary artists - because where there is opposition, awarding results can at least be suspected or hoped for...

Returning to the sound circle metaphor, I now try to name and discuss certain points that (I find) generally characterize works in the field on "inters": interactive, intermedia, interdisciplinary etc... They seek to locate themselves in a middle position - in contrast to a projected "outside". Like with the mixer/engi-

neer/navigator in my example the emphasis is not on being exposed on the fringes, but on being integrated in a net of conditions that transform and can be transformed. This necessarily results not just in a change of position but also in a change of material background or context. As the material background-condition consists of a general overflow, the basic question is not what to select (as a material), but what to actually select as a selective measure or method. It is about the careful choice of a tool, happening in the context of self-reflection.

As there is no projective frame the work should be able to navigate (or, in a motion of exchange, be subject to mutual navigation). Similar to my "mixer" example, the result of the artistic action is not just an "output" but a motion, which can cope with its effects or its feedback. This doesn't necessarily mean a factual movement (although this is imaginable as well ...) of the respective work, but rather a state which allows "process" of the effects of its effects and also to direct, to re-work or to transform materials which enter the process from more or less related or parallel processes.

Basically, I guess, such works realize and establish an equilibrium within the movement they originate from or direct, rather than to potentially display or act out idiosyncrasies within their contexts or environments. Time thus moves into the focus of attention: because all action that re-integrates feedback (as in my navigator example, where the flow of the audience becomes data for a change of input) needs to maintain a multileveled relation to its timing and being timed. Unlike in a usual musical piece, in which a played sound becomes a past event (which may reverberate just in the memory of the single listener), the networked piece, whatever medium it utilizes, will have to consider both: a present input will influence a past which returns as relevant information to this present. Or projective measures can be used, supposed to direct the further development of the structure, informed or corrected by the (so called) past... In general: the interactive piece or work bears features, which one usually identifies with "strategy". The communicative impetus, usually subliminal in artworks, returns as a form of interactive playground, which surrounds the course of the work like a halo, both in terms of time and space.

It is inevitable to talk about such interactive or intermediary works in quite abstract terminology (as I do here...) - also because the media used by such works are abstracted from the artistic materials. This does not mean they are restricted just to common materials nor that artistic materials (such as paint or a piano sound...) are off limits. It just means that the focus is directed toward an in-between; these works can swap materials and media, or transgress from one to the next - not in the sense of a progression on different carriers, but as a translation that also transforms.