VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF THE AVANT-GARDE ART AND THE NETWORKING MUSEOLOGY

Summary

The paper discusses the initiative held by the City of Varaždin and collector Marinko Sudac. The city is one of the foremost culturally oriented local authorities in Croatia, and collector has, over the past several years, gathered an impressive collection of the avant-garde art from all around the region. They have joined together in the idea of creating the virtual museum of avant-garde art that would include including works originating from as early as 1920s up to the contemporary ones. The regional character of the collection (by region meaning the territory behind the "Iron Curtain") is already recognised by the art critics as Jerko Denegri and Želimir Koščević.

But the idea of virtual museum (http://www.avantgarde-museum.com) is a completely new fact which inaugurates a significant method of comprehension of such an art production. It uses the state of the art programmes and protocols to enable the insight into the collection in a new way, offering not only the passive museum info, but also the cross referencing, combination of data as well as ordinary exhibition practice in virtual rooms of museum.

Such an approach suites the museum topic very well since the avant-garde art is, by its definition, challenging and at the same time embracing various aspects of modernity thus remaining elusive for a comprehensive critical and theoretic approach. However, by creating the virtual rooms and offering the information on such an art practice could result productive in understanding of the ever-changing ideas and manifestations of avant-garde art.

Introduction

Is it possible to represent an art phenomenon of the 20th century in a new, technological variation of a medium which the fundamental stream of the same phenomenon has persistently contested? How to museologically properly represent the essence of what is called the avant-garde art and how to offer it to the researchers when its nature is so fluid? The problem becomes even more complex when we consider the art that came into existence on the edge of modernisation

processes, far from the centre of modernity within which the avant-garde ideology was formed. These are some of the issues that are important to address when discussing a great private collection of avant-garde art such as Marinko Sudac Collection which, in collaboration with the City of Varaždin, systematically gathers works and documentation and exhibits them in the museums and galleries throughout the region. Most of the works from a total of 6,000 pieces were created in today states originating from the former Yugoslavia, during the period from the beginning of the 20th century to the late '70s, following the idea of experimental, socially provocative, investigative and media wise unconventional art practice.

Although museums throughout the world and local region include such works, the collector and the City of Varaždin wished to represent these works in a way that is completely new and unusual in museological practice, but quite appropriate for the collected art material. They have initiated the virtual museum of avant-garde art.

The notion of avant-garde

At the very beginning of this text I am denoting the position of avant-gardism as very important. Is it today still possible to use the term avant-garde and remain convincing enough? Considering the fact that in the times of fragmentation of the centres of modernity the dominant idea of social-economic progress has dissipated into an immeasurable sequence of local narratives, it seems that a sound foundation is necessary for the usage of notion or adjective avant-garde in order it could convey any meaning close to the original one. (Rogers 1974:78-86).

On this occasion, while trying to describe this phenomenon it is necessary to define an adequate framework that should necessarily include the following thematic units: the notion of avant-garde, progress as a conception and modernisation as a process, idea of modernity, relationships between corporative and individual and finally the art as a set of visual facts and design as a system of identity as well as both as models of communication. (Bolz 2001: 66-69).

The notion of avant-garde is historically limited and connected to the very foundations of civil democracy and the idea of the individual as bearer of cultural transformation. Since these transformations had intensified during the period of industrial modernisation, riding the wave of mass production and consumption, the notion of avant-garde - that is, what we can today understand as a practice in the real historic period - was getting more complex at quite a dynamic rate. This

dynamics is the very point of difference by which, for example, modern culture differs from the traditional one as denoted by the protracted style formations. Strictly theoretically speaking, the avant-gardism as category can be attributed to various forms of activities within the community, based on the relationship between the individual and collective identity. However, within the practices of different disciplines of humanistic sciences, it has become quite usual to discuss the avant-garde as a sequence of artistic movements, principally in architecture, visual arts and literature, from the last quarter of the 19th to the mid 20th century. The more rigorous critical historians would narrow this period down to the even shorter span of time, because not all of them agree on the categorisation, although the most of them would confirm that the times of historic avant-garde is over. (Walker 1989). This is principally because the linkage between the art and social and political project has completely changed the direction of activities during the last fifty years. Because, lets not forget, the avant-gardism as attribute has also been connected to the ideological activities.

Reminiscence of that level of meaning of avant-garde indicates to the relation of progress as conception and modernisation processes. It not necessary to emphasise here that general endeavours of modernisation created the sufficient basis for the establishment of economic development as the primary social category. Insofar the idea of progressiveness, practically since the steam engine came into use in production processes and since the French Revolution, has also been projected into various social spheres, all the way from politics in the strict sense to arts. Here the key factor was the mechanistic image of the world of incessant mechanical manufacture producing always increasing quantity of products in order to satisfy the needs of growing population. (Buck Morss 2002). Or, vice versa, first there were the needs and then the production. The process of modernisation of the western society or refinement of capitalism as a new civil formation designates the progressiveness as a completely new ecological fact, relating natural as social environment alike. In progressivist philosophy the available resources comprised (and still comprise) everything natural (including the humanity) and everything else that constant efforts of modernisation transform into artificial forms. Mass production and art alike. (Habermas 1983:3-16).

There is a certain relation between the modernisation efforts and avant-garde visions that could also be denoted as reactive or such that typically describes avant-garde art as modernist reaction to processes of modernisation. In the gap separating action

from reaction the modernity is created as a resultant and immense reservoir of ideas and conceptions: from positive and negative utopias to anti-globalisation movements of today. Is it at all possible to assimilate the phenomena of modernity to any durable semantic position? That is not easy at all, one could say, since already because of the continuity, that is – progressiveness, processes enticing the modernity, the contents thus created (by reaction) find themselves in the state of incessant flux. (Bonsiepe 1999:26-37). The idea of modernity, however, has primarily literary character, although today it is possible to trace it on various levels of cultural production. The notion of avant-garde within the phenomenon of modernity is probably the most productive segment of now already historic narrative about the creation of modern western culture. This is because in a short period of time – mostly from the beginning to mid 20th century – there has been created a quantity of new contents greater than centuries before that, right on the trail of Morus' idea of "the century bearing more history than any before that". Or more precisely – the awareness about the history and cultural production. (Julier 2000). Since this awareness is mostly stimulated by the exceptional development of mass media as yet another set of modernisation processes, the former avant-garde cultural tendencies have transformed themselves from visionary works into facts of general knowledge, today represented in mass produced monographs and available and usable in different strategies of public communications. The post-industrial culture, which is often also called philosophy of post-Fordist economy, highlights the symbolic qualities of products as the most important ones. (Baudrillard 1989:171-183). On that functional level the former artistic experiments have become a part of general cultural repertoire. But, has this process cleared the identity of individuals who as artists worked within the context of ideologically ideated industrial modernisation? And, finally, how is this whole phenomenon influenced by and how is it related to a new medium as Internet?

The future of Internet

In the world today most of the experts confirm that the future of Internet is to become a communal service. But which one? The future of Internet is by all means cultural and social question based on technology, according not only to the character of this medium, but also to its effects on the real social environment, especially if we

consider the influence of on-line communications on the Western culture since Internet became widely available.

Therefore it seems impossible to avoid the definition of possible directions of Internet development in the future while pondering upon the models of connecting the ideas of avant-garde art and their representation in the virtual space. In this moment, to delineate these directions it seems very incentive to consider the ideas and activities of one of the originators of the World Wide Web on CERN. Tim Berners Lee, the American scientist and former researcher of the famous Swiss institute, in May 2001 published in the magazine The Scientific American the article "The Semantic Web" (http://www.sciam.com/) explaining the conception of semantic Internet which "not only connects documents, but also recognises their contents". Berners Lee claims that "today Internet is actually a publishing medium – a place for storage and exchange of ideas. The addition of semantics will radically transform the Internet from space used only to show information into a space where the information will be interpreted, exchanged and processed". Two scientific and technological teams on the universities of Stanford and Karlsruhe collaborate on the concept of "semantic Web". A specific site is also created for the exchange of ideas and information on the most recent development stages of this concept (http://www.semanticweb.org), while the site http://www.w3.org offers extensive literature about the topic today already colloquially called Web 2.0.

Although in this moment it is only possible to speculate about the protocols and program languages that will be used in the final (and commercial) version of the "semantic Web", it seems important to highlight this new quality of Internet that is conceptually deliberated and technologically developed on such a high scientific level. In fact, the idea about which Berners Lee writes is one step further in the development of Internet as medium, while the philosophical and technological implementation of semantics into the medium represents the instrument that in the future could help what today we call World Wide Web to become even more capillary means of communication within the human society, regardless the purposes in which it may be employed.

Already the fact that such future character of the most universal global medium is pondered on a certain level, on one hand speaks about the necessity of its further implementation into the social trends, from scientific to commercial, and on the other it indicates the direction of communication technology development in general. Because semantics is nothing else but a theoretical interpretation of human nervous

system in its most perfect function – the creation of meaning. In that sense the "semantic Web" can be regarded as a further step in the process of humanisation of the machine, but by means of various interfaces that are the artificial surrogate for different cultural strata of meaning.

Insofar we can conclude that the future Internet will be a public utility within a very wide spectrum of social activities for individuals or groups, spanning from the simplest exchange of data to the complex analytical enterprises and researches. Furthermore, if Berners Lee's theory is correct, it means that in the future (considering the pace of technology development – very near future) Internet will be a total mass media, oriented towards technologically less demanding users, but also towards those in search for more sophisticated web solutions or indeed a future nervous system of global society. So far it is possible to deduce that Internet is slowly leaving the field of technological exotic and shifting towards being totally present in the everyday life. Something similar happened about hundred years ago with the usage of electric energy which, at the end of 19th century, still was nothing more but a scientific and technological conception. In the meantime it became not only a standard, but even a civilisation criterion of contemporary world, just like Emil Rathenau perceived it when, after visiting the new technologies exhibition in Paris, he dreamt of the whole world entangled in a web of electrical wires. Subsequently he founded the AEG company whose scientific, technological and commercial operations greatly contributed to the creation of this very web upon which the great part of today technology depends, including the Internet itself.

Therefore it is possible to consider Internet as the "electricity" of tomorrow, that is, a service without which civilised life would be impossible. Insofar the capillary spreading of semantic tools of Internet could be regarded as technological realisation of the ideas of avant-garde art, from futuristic visions of technological future and ideas of "machine art" to the experiments with computers or youthfully subversive ideas about the participatory society of equals.

Marginal specificities or hybrid identity of modernist tradition

The works from Marinko Sudac Collection should be represented in accordance with Frederic Jameson's thesis about modernity being a narrative category instead of philosophical or scientific notion. That is exactly how they are represented in the virtual museum. The collection includes art works from all over the ex-Yugoslavia,

spanning the better part of the 20th century and created according to personal artistic visions in various and sometimes diametrically opposed social environments. It is of great importance that the works here represented had been created during a time period that is today recognised as a setting of modernism in the local context. The collector himself gathered these works under the working title of "avant-garde" art.

The introductory note should indicate the position from which it would be possible to review the exceptionally complex collection represented by the virtual museum after it has already been presented in few material museums and galleries. Jameson gave an excellent description of that position in the conclusion of his book "A Singular Modernity". He believes that in order to perceive the present it is above all necessary to understand that historic awareness (on artistic, instead of scientific level) is created through the perspective of experience, "here and now", and based on thus formed insight the future oriented decisions are made. Afterwards he concludes: "in order to grasp the present, the archaeology of future is more necessary than foreseeing the past".

This methodical inversion seems paradoxical. How it is possible to understand what is yet to happen thanks to what happened in the past or how to examine the past combining the previsions of future?

Indicating at an interpretation of modernity, Jameson is in fact referring to one of the important qualities of modernism in arts, often labelled as "avant-garde". During the 20th century this quality became the basis of elitist art culture or acting on the basis of the enlightenment concept of linearity of time, space and biological and social being. This concept also includes the idea of development or dialectics. Modernist art of the 20th century functions at the same time as the "archaeology of the future" and as the "foreseeing of the past", because it operates with the linear concept, approving or disapproving it through various avant-garde formations and different operational methods.

Such character of modernism is a basis for the hybrid identity of artistic practice that is composed of two seemingly disparate facts: contemporary acceptance and rejection of modernisation processes. During the 20th century modernism has been, as a reflexion of these processes, transformed from the alternative subculture into elitist tradition which is by itself contrasting that character of culture that some theoreticians (Fry) define as "modernity", thus denoting the symbolising practice of

mass media and commercial communication. However, it is well known that modernist artists, from Duchamp to Warhol, availed themselves of techniques and media of mass culture.

What would then be the difference between the modernism and mass culture? One of the most obvious ones is possible to define by Jameson's thought, because the mass culture, thanks to the given commercial conditions, can only follow the linear development of these same conditions. Therefore, if there is any "archaeology" here, then it is only about redefining the symbolic values in new semantic structures, while the "foresights" are related only to the organisation of the semantic program of within the relations between work and capital. The elitist modernism is, however, a cognitive technique and quite often a social critique, too.

Here it has to be clear that all here described regards the ideally typical situation that can exist on the reminiscence level of western metropolis, supported by museums of modern and contemporary art, leaning on market mechanisms and, last but not least, with help of humanistic sciences that recognise everything that seems "different". But, what about the communities that are just starting to build their museums of contemporary art and whose cultural politics still cannot discern archaeology from sociology or which humanistic sciences are still organised by the discipline or ex cathedrae instead of being problem oriented? In the same environment, as this collection also shows, there is a certain modernist tradition. How does, then, modernism function on the margins of modernisation processes?

According to the works that this collection gathered in one place, it could be possible to indicate few facts regarding the comprehension of totality and individuality of modernism in the local context. First of all, these are the works originating from three completely different social contexts out of which it is impossible to historify and valorise every single work. Furthermore, the collected works represent a great number of artists who have been put together for the first time into the same exhibiting context, selected by Jerko Denegri. This situation offers the opportunity to ponder upon the many particularities of works and possibly to search for the common denominator of modernism in local context for two reasons: on one hand the social context in which the works were created has been completely transformed and on the other the artists who created these works are mostly still alive, so that the whole content of the collection is offered for interpretation as an "open work". The particularities of the social context also provoke a special character of local modernism which means that the generally hybrid quality of this art can, in

interpretative optics, assume additional qualities. According to the experiences gathered through similar researches of past few years in other environments on margins of modernisation, one could deduce that for the comprehensive understanding of modernism it is necessary to compare it in detail with the mass culture or that character of "modernity" that is directly conditioned by ideology (either political or commercial). In modernist art this conditioning is indirect and more often than not ironically defined. Therefore the relations of mass culture and elitist art can in any local environment provide sufficient information for better comprehension of "archaeology of the future" and "foreseeing of the past", according to the contemporary interdisciplinary character of humanistic sciences.

Virtual museum as avant-garde position

Marginality, hybridity, technological conditioning and tendencies towards democratisation of art are all evident constants of avant-garde art and at the same time basic qualities providing special meaning to the idea of their representation on the Web. The structure of the virtual museum of avant-garde arts as presented on http://avantgarde-museum.com is based upon the representation of individual oeuvres, with exhaustive complementary documentation and bibliography. Besides, virtual museum offers the possibility to connect different oeuvres or groups, thus encouraging, in very innovative and interactive manner, critic and synthetic thinking of the museological material. It is possible to see the works in one (virtual) place and at the same time analyse the relevant documentation or connect referential works or phenomena, while in the material museum it is necessary first to work on its collections, then in the depot and finally in the documentation room or library. Virtual museum of avant-garde offers all of this in one place, even including the three-dimensional simulation of an exhibition space for the future temporary exhibits! Therefore (and because it complies with the very nature of represented content), it seems that this innovative initiative of an art collection and a city in Croatia could be a stimulating example of the future network museology. This conception could enable a more creative interpretation of the material by the use of more available techniques for museological material management.

Networking museology, if executed according to the certain principles promoted by the virtual museum of avant-garde art, could be defined as a new approach to the

museological material or, literally, as the "semantic web" that promotes the creation of meaning or, in fact, interpretation instead of sheer registration of facts. Regarding the museology in physical, analogue space, this new approach to their museums' holdings could offer completely new and even unexpected possibilities of interpretation as well as perception. In that sense the idea of virtual museum is completely in spirit of the investigative and experimental character of avant-garde art.

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