

»
Maska Vol. XXV1, 2011

ABSTRACT ORNAMENTAL MOVEMENT STRAIGHT AND LOOK

INTRODUCTION

JANEZ STREHO

PREVOD / TRANSLATION
ŠPELA DRNČIČ

PREVOJE 5

Contemporary art, and particularly new media art that manifests itself in the globalised world of new social and cultural paradigms, are at the same play with other social fields yet its critical reflection (and reproduction) also contributes autonomous forms, and even original modes of production, which challenge contemporary social theory. In our first special section of contributions from this field (*Maska*, no. 141-142, 2011), we focused on two excerpts from Beller and Negri's book that most definitely challenge established conceptions of the social functions of contemporary art. This text introduces the second and final segment relating to this theme: it includes the translation of Kracauer's essay *The Mass Ornament* as well as Baron's text on Natalie Bookchin's art work of the same name, in which the author applies the matrix of Kracauer's ornament to the current situation of post-Fordist labour, flexible consumption and the culture of social networking. The special section is rounded off by two essays from Slovenian authors, Mojca Puncer (on the role of the media in contemporary art) and the author of this text (on art in the age of financial capitalist crisis).

The essay by American theorist Jaimie Baron (her first published text, adapted here for *Maska*) critically and conceptually illuminates Bookchin's video project - and yet to understand it fully, and to understand the subject we have been dealing with in our two translated instalments, it is important to note Bookchin's own reflections on this set of issues. In conversation with *Rhizome.org*, she very precisely located the theoretical underpinnings of her art project in the world of immaterial and post-Fordist labour, and thus also defined her relationship to Kracauer's text as a crucial reference for her "YouTube" project.

"[As] the Tiller Girls dance embodied characteristics of Fordism and Taylorism, the YouTube dance, with its emphasis on the individual, the home, and individuated and internalized production, embodies key characteristics of our economic situation of

This theoretical point is central, as the dancers involved in the ornamental, desexualised and highly abstract dance of the mass spectacle (ranging from the rituals of the Third Reich to more contemporary versions such as Tito's Youth Relay and Kim Il Sung's ceremonies) do not reflect anything but rather work hand in hand with the workers behind factory conveyor belts whose movements are Tayloristically trained and adapted to machines.

post-Fordism.¹ Both the spectacular dance of the Tiller Girls in the stadium (which Kracauer refers to) and the private dance of the YouTube dancers in front of web cams internalise foundational paradigms of contemporary society. The former deals with references to mega-events, large-scale serial factory production, the logic of machines and the conveyor belt, while the latter confronts us with a much more flexible and individualised action, which frequently takes place in the home and whose machinery is no longer mechanical but increasingly digital. "The YouTube dancer alone in her room, performing a dance routine that is both extremely private and extraordinarily public is, in its own way, a perfect expression of our age."² The video included in this project has lost its autonomy and only appears as part of a social and cultural context that overdetermines the choreography of bodies and their media-proliferated practices. Her installation also hinges on the technological basis of the YouTube portal, which offers links from one video to a different, similar video (these appear off to the right) and thus addresses the culture of video distribution where one video can trigger a veritable chain reaction of numerous manipulations (mixes, remixes, copies, variations, modifications, etc). Bookchin's project is embedded in a culture of social networks and their media, which also inspired Baron: her text is a critical illumination of the numerous variations and antagonisms that accompany the "post-Fordist" mass ornament.

Bookchin's project is without a doubt a manipulation that can be located in the nucleus of today's media-proliferated mass culture of remixes, machinima and mash-ups. "Our perception of intentional disparity derives from the fact that Bookchin has clearly taken all of these solo performances and turned them into a collective dance, transforming individual, isolated performers into a dance troupe."³ We are faced with a situation similar to

that of the Tiller Girls, where dancers lack a view of the whole; the dancers who entered Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* from this or that place did not know that their dances would contribute to a whole. Baron also points to the duality and conflict that permeate the dancers of today, caught and manipulated in Bookchin's video. On the one hand, they express anonymity and privacy, voices and choreography from below, while on the other, their private dance has already been mediated and influenced by popular culture, the stars and trends dictated by the market.

We have begun with Bookchin, but it is time to turn our attention to Kracauer's classic essay from the field of critical cultural theory. "The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls."⁴ This theoretical point is central, as the dancers involved in the ornamental, desexualised and highly abstract dance of the mass spectacle (ranging from the rituals of the Third Reich to more contemporary versions such as Tito's Youth Relay and Kim Il Sung's ceremonies) do not reflect anything but rather work hand in hand with the workers behind factory conveyor belts whose movements are Tayloristically trained and adapted to machines. There is a smooth transition between dancers and workers, similar to that of the organisation of moving cinematic images (as is claimed by Jonathan Beller). Thus, there is not only a correspondence between film and industrial production behind the conveyor belt, but also between industrial production and dance, as the latter is staged at events of the mass spectacle. The Tiller Girls' movements form geometric shapes characterised by their abstractness (that is, de-realised embodiment and sexuality) and the fact that they play out in ornaments, which are also present in the circular capitalist movements of loops that characteristically demonstrate this type of drive. The Tiller Girls dance with parts of bodies which seem emphatically isolated; their choreography is a symptom of capitalism itself. The dance ornament demands the subjugation of body parts to more complex patterns, such as a row of lines, which no one dancer

1 Carolyn Kane, "Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin", Wed. May 27th, 2009, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/>, 2009 (accessed on August 31, 2011).

2 Ibid.

3 Jaimie Baron, "Subverted Intentions and the Potential for 'Found' Collectivity in Natalie Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*", *Maska*, no. 143-144, 2011, p. 34.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, edited by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 79.

“The ornament is an end in itself,” writes Kracauer, and thus directs our attention to the vacuum-like expanse of ornamental forms that empty all substance of its contents. “The ornament resembles *aerial photographs* of landscapes and cities,” since the matter at hand can only be truly perceived from the air; when dealing with ornamental patterns, we can only make them out in images “from above”, for example, the images that were transmitted by the top-most video

can perceive. The dance movements of each individual dancer were thus interpreted only as functional parts of a system, just as a worker's hand in Taylorist organised labour behind the conveyor belt.

“The ornament is an end in itself,”⁵ writes Kracauer, and thus directs our attention to the vacuum-like expanse of ornamental forms that empty all substance of its contents. “The ornament resembles *aerial photographs* of landscapes and cities,”⁶ since the matter at hand can only be truly perceived from the air; when dealing with ornamental patterns, we can only make them out in images “from above”, for example, the images that were transmitted by the top-most video cameras at the JLA Stadium in Belgrade during the spectacles of the Youth Relay ceremony. This “above” is indeed fitting when speaking of those things produced by global capitalism, the war machine and mass culture. The lens of the “smart bomb eye”,⁷ relayed during the first Gulf War to television screens during CNN's breaking news, has become acceptable for such arrangements.

We are hereby dealing with abstraction (of straight lines, loops, repeating forms, the reduction of contents to highly economical and palatable signifiers), which is inherent to both capitalism and post-Fordist production (especially to Taylorist production). The latter has undergone certain changes in the post-Fordist paradigm, yet much of its cultural contents is still overdetermined by the social and ideological system. Abstraction could also become a legitimate yardstick for numerous critical approaches to new media art, whose contents are frequently, markedly abstract in the sense that they are preoccupied with forms, media and smart technologies. Faced with today's production in this field, we often find that it revolves around artists' explanations and statements, and even theoretical texts from this field are

more often than not mere explanations of art works rather than critiques comparing and evaluating them in relation to other similar art projects.

Both traditional mass media and the new media linked particularly to the Internet boom generate various forms of media- and new media art, where theoretical approaches have begun to replace “media-specific analysis” (as coined by N. K. Hayles) with socio-critical frameworks that emphasise the embeddedness of this art within contemporary social paradigms, so that Nicolas Bourriaud writes about relational art “taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context.”⁸ These questions have also inspired the theorist Mojca Puncer, whose essay problematises the role of cultural-artistic engagement in the mobilisation of emancipatory forces. She begins by stating a thought that goes on to form one of the red threads of her discussion: “Defining art through its medium is part of a formalist aesthetic tradition that post-structuralism and feminist theory already challenged from the mid-twentieth century onwards.”⁹ The conceptual apparatus suitable to understanding traditional art fails when applied to contemporary art and its social reality (both of which can be considered precarious), yet the hybrid contents of contemporary art, which seeks new, even post-aesthetic social functions, inspire considerably varied artistic-theoretical approaches (say, the writings of Jacques Rancière and Thomas Hirschhorn), which we would do well to also read in the context of contemporary social theory (Giorgio Agamben). Puncer thus finds that “contemporary art persists in the tension between autonomous and politically engaged art, and thus remains in some form of (minimal) representative relation to social reality, which is always socially determined.”¹⁰

These are certainly complex relations; since new media is today

5 Ibid., p. 76.

6 Ibid., p. 77.

7 This refers to video recordings taken from a smart guided missile, which show its approach to the targeted object.

8 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les Presse Du Réel, 1998, p. 14.

9 Mojca Puncer, “Contemporary Art - A Herald of New Social Paradigms?”, *Maska*, no. 143-144, 2011, p. 45.

10 Ibid., p. 48.

cameras at the JLA Stadium in Belgrade during the spectacles of the Youth Relay ceremony. This “above” is indeed fitting when speaking of those things produced by global capitalism, the war machine and mass culture. The lens of the “smart bomb eye”, relayed during the first Gulf War to television screens during CNN’s breaking news, has become acceptable for such arrangements.

precisely the driving force behind new sociality, much aided by its purely technological and software bases, the opposition of media versus the social can no longer function: indeed, “digital processes have expanded the ways in which documents found in digital archives may be repurposed.”¹¹

The abstraction that Siegfried Kracauer’s essay outlines through an analysis of capitalism and its choreographies (the dance of the Tiller Girls) is also the focal point of economic financial markets, which are one of the starting points of the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Turmoil in the Financial Markets”, contributed by myself. In this text, the core reflections revolve around the paradigms of: economics as culture, the artistic economy (which the contemporary artist must invent in its own unique form), the cultural economy, in the sense of transitioning from profane to valorised artistic archives, and the trading of derivatives (implemented financial instruments), all of which can act as a model for understanding several economic operations within contemporary art. The references to grand themes and archetypal motifs in contemporary and especially new media art can also be explained by much more contemporary concepts borrowed from economics, in that artists today draw on underlying assets of famous art works by brand-name-artists, and refer to these assets in order to insure their interests or even to create a profit. They create derivative works by referring to the indisputable value of the underlying referenced work,¹² which by its recognised worth indirectly justifies the recognition of its spin-off. This is characteristic of the work of an artist we highlight in this issue: Natalie Bookchin, whose video projects *The Intruder* and *Mass Ornament* seize Borges’s novella and Kracauer’s essay as their underlying values. ■

Literature

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les Presse Du Réel, 1998.

Hayles, N. Katherine, *Writing Machines*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

Carolyn Kane, “Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin”, Wed. May 27th, 2009, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/>, 2009 (accessed on August 31, 2011).

Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, edited by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

11 Baron, as cited, p. 33.