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DIGITAL STRATUM

On Optical Beats and Visual Dolby Surround:
Stratification Strategies in Christoph Hinterhuber's Art

DIGITAL ATTRACTION

In recent years, the digital world has accelerated itself into a voracious attractor, drawing in everything in the sense of attraction or attractivity and drawing off the productive forces from the real world like a vacuum cleaner. Realities are sucked into a whirlpool and rotate faster and faster around the magical void of the digital matrix, in which a frenetic calm paradoxically predominates like in the eye of a hurricane. In a way comparable with the Steady-State Theory (1), the data space constantly fills up with set pieces mirrored in immateriality and expands apparently without limits into the astronomical expanses of cyberspace. Even though the Steady-State model has lost its relevance for describing the actual cosmos, it has attained a new social relevance in relation to the cybercosmos or the net and our digital culture. While our stage of civilization has been characterized until now by the phenomenon that the space of nature has basically been swallowed up by culture—every object blocks space, every house takes up ground—, in cyberspace we are confronted with the opposite phenomenon, because every home-page expands the electronic space. Virtual spaces follow the logic of the inverse and the perverse, so that, in the sense of Nietzsche's revaluation of all values, the inversion of culture has been accomplished in the digital and is evident in the boom and bust movements of the information streams and economic data in the electronic networks. Thus digital culture and electronic networks not only duplicate the world, they divide it as well and create new worlds. At the same time, more and more tears and holes erupt between these worlds and the old world, inciting interactions and mingling between the real and the virtual. Comparable with the black holes and white holes of astronomy, digital space depletes reality, resources, working time, etc. on the one hand, while on the other it generates its own realities and constitutes new paradigms. In only a few years, there will be more people working on the virtual world than building on the real world. (It is common knowledge that the software industry has long since surpassed the steel and steel-processing industry.) We are mutating into purely symbolic workers, and the net provides us with the architecture for this: whereas the Egyptians had their pyramids and the gothic age had its cathedrals, today we live in a global architecture of satellites and fiber optic cables.

Yet the virtual attractor does not only function according to the rules of absorption, it also corresponds to the physical model of a mixer, layering finer and finer strata of the heterogeneities that are simultaneously and parallelly available in the instant time and instant space of the digital, and allowing these to interfere with one another. If the distinctions between the real and the virtual, the contingently possible and the naturally necessary ever were clearly set, they have now become streaming fluidities distorting the difference between the technical and the natural in double-helix fashion. In the same way that we live in technology, technology has taken residence in us, so in reference to our interface existence, we can now only speak in analogy to the Möbius strip of a Möbius body and a Möbius psyche.

(1) The Steady State Theory by Hermann Bondi, Thomas Gold and Sir Fred Hoyle in the late forties represented an astrophysical model, which assumed, contrary to the Big Bang Theory, that while mass remains the same, new matter is constantly being formed, filling up the spaces left as the galaxies expand and drift apart.

In the next few years, the world will be so networked that every refrigerator and every toaster will have its own Internet address. Consequently, we might speak of a new animism, as everything is digitally animated to communicate and interact with everything else.

An expansion of identity is rising to the point of disintegrating into cyberecstasy, which means that the human being as a stand-alone appliance has become obsolete and mutated from an individual into a networked polyvidual, which is intersected by the most diverse discourses, frequencies, images, dogmas and interests.

Subject and society are undergoing a fundamental process of recoding, in which the dictum that technology realizes myths in order to conversely form myths is currently affirmed in the program code of digital culture.

Hinterhuber's works function like visual attractors, allegorizing the threshold between the real and the virtual. Precisely the themes sketched above are reflected in titles such as Black Sun, Gate, Matrix, Trance, Central, Spirals, Spheres, Cosmic, Psychic Deli or Buddha Control. They range from the gravitational collapse of our real world and the emergence of virtual holes (Black Sun), to the interfaces between the real and the virtual (Gate) and electronic space as a new biotope (Matrix), all the way to the mythical and psychical dimensions of the technical (Buddha Control, Trance, Psychic Deli).

DIGITAL GLAMOUR

Christoph Hinterhuber's art communicates surfaces and textures, yet without becoming superficial, for materials, media and forms are related to one another in an elaborate conjunction of meaning, transporting or rather regrouping complexities into simple codes and reduced means of configuration. Here, however, his works, which start primarily in the 3D program Strata Studio, correspond to the term stratum not only with regards to design and rendering. For Hinterhuber, stratum (from Latin meaning to cover), which designates a flat, extended layer of tissue in medicine, for instance, the habitat layer of a biotope in biology, or a level of society in sociology, means primarily a layering of realities, within which his art represents a permeable membrane between the structural planes of the real and the virtual. Like bubbles rising from the depths of the digital ocean, objects emerge in his works; some of them break through the surface or the interface separating the immaterial from the material and unfold and volumize physically in space. In this stratum of art, objects consist merely of thin, ephemeral skins, whose volumes are immaterial and whose surface forms through the suffusion of the virtual with the material.

His artistic methods may be characterized as antagonistic, operating with two phases of virtuality, whereby the virtuality of the first order carries out a duplication of reality—the motif of the „space stage“ in the images—, whereas the virtuality of the second order incarnates something that is without reference to previous realities. In analogy to the rearview mirror of a car („objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear“), the images, which simulate possible installations and objects in the digital spotlight of ray tracing, could be regarded as a foreview mirror of the self. This game of orders of reality and virtuality embroils itself in a chiasmic antagonism, which is perpetuated through the relationship of the images to the objects, finally flowing into a dialogue between the realization of image spaces and the virtualization of art spaces.

Christoph Hinterhuber installs optical Dolby Systems, which immersively swallow the observer, who oscillates between these inter-dependencies in surround mode, transforming him in such a way that he becomes able to aesthetically, i.e. perceivably, stratify the digital re-evolution of culture and his own position in it as mediated subject. Metaphorically speaking, Hinterhuber's images could be taken as loudspeakers and the concomitant objects and installations as spatial sounds, whereby the beats come to the fore, so to speak, in their economic meaning of an information edge that decides a successful transaction on the stock

market. The visual beats create a physical environment of a digital biotope, simultaneously transporting the observer into the hypnotic rhythm of a cybertrance and the consciousness of an information stage of machines and their net society far from humanity, disclosing a premonition of possible forms of post-human communication, which we are cognitively only able to convert into abstract patterns. Even though the objects may be reminiscent of the effects of Op Art in an outdated style-historical categorization, semiotically they correspond more to the textures of melted texts. Data liquefies into meta-structures like Murano glass and condenses into super-signs evincing minimal shifts in their simplicity and redundancy. These conversely strain our perception subtly and correct it. To this extent, Hinterhuber's objects may be read as condensations, which function as icons of digital culture.

DIGITAL RESISTANCE

The state of a digital culture, whose input of the real is the output of the virtual and vice versa, is decided by the way that it deals with information. People in a highly flexibilized technosociety increasingly see their sense of identity threatened in the polar field of redundancy and contingency. Somewhat simplified, this means that opportunities, if their needs are not recognized, form the syndrome of a politics of the new right-wing populists, whose socio-psychological basis represents an amalgam of external and internal anxieties, emanating from the implosion of an existential crisis with a political crisis. In this way, monomedia hegemony and social entropy are closely tied to nationalism and neoliberalism, resulting in the need for an electronic ecology, which includes both politics and economy, in order to guarantee the survival and continued functioning of society and the public sphere. Here, as an interface between social systems, art is called upon not only to foster compatibilities and comparabilities and to install a pool of the public sphere, but also to train ways of dealing with media worldliness.

Particularly a young generation of artists, whose production conditions have radically changed and whose work and life is organized in dislocative production networks, has the potential to develop alternatives and correctives for life not only in and with, but also outside ochlocratic media. Mobile ateliers and floating studios as a current stage of young art production reflect the phenomena of societal flexibilization, and even though the artist is systemically located at the periphery of society, for this very reason he is at the center of cultural realities and their changes due to networking and globalization.

Christoph Hinterhuber is aware of the explosiveness of art functioning as a social simulation space, in which it is a matter of reflecting not only aesthetic conditions, but also political and economic conditions, and he maps out the paradox of an affirmative resistance formula. His works have an affirmative effect, because they instigate a calculated and virulent game with the laws and conditions of the bourgeoisie art market and its reception standards. Yet they also have a subversive effect, because they create an access to realities that subject sense and senses, systems and cognition to a deconstructive process of reversal and an analysis of political ray tracing and economic rendering. In the current context of Austrian politics, where neo-liberal and national-liberalistic tendencies run rampant, this has a significance for the democratic vitality of society and culture that should not be underestimated.