

**Dejan Grba**

## ***Bastards of the Cool (2D MutantZombies)***

This is an online version of the video lecture *Bastards of the Cool* which was presented at the 2D MutantZombies project exhibition in Medienkustlabor in Graz 2007, which was itself an elaboration of the lecture *n-Dimensional Zombies: The Possibility of n-Mutation* that I gave at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Summer Art School *Some Like It Hot* in Pirot 2006. The Summer School topic was the identity and my critical reaction to it provided the conceptual platform for the workshop.

Hi, my name is Dejan Grba, I am a male, I am a fine artist, and this is a video lecture titled *Bastards of the Cool*. It accompanies the 2D MutantZombies project for which it intends to provide a cultural and artistic context.

2D MutantZombies project started as the media-art workshop that I mentored at Belgrade's University of the Arts Summer School in Pirot, Serbia, in July 2006. The workshop served as the initial production phase for a project whose further development included exhibitions, presentations, printed and online documentation. The participating artists – Christina Ardelean, Eva Artinger, Ana Krstić, Nevena Nikolić, Adrian Parvulescu, Evelin Stermitz, Bojana Rajević, and Sanja Ždrnja – proved to be fantastic collaborators and, as you can see, very efficient and capable in running this project.

### **Intro**

In my opinion, the general approach to identity in contemporary art originates in post-conceptual and post-modernist deconstruction of artistic identity of the Seventies and the Eighties that, by the influence of cultural studies during the Nineties, established itself as some kind of official pluralist platform in today's culture, in which the identity is instrumentalized into a universal paradigm.

Contemporary art and art theories address the identity predominantly from psychological, gender, racial, ethnic, social and political aspects. Significantly, all these are aspects of personal identity and, as the term *persona* indicates a facade one presents to the world, the identity is perceived mainly in the public and social, that is, in cultural context. Cultural context is highly relational, it depends on social trends, and relies on language that relies primarily on the process of recognition-repetition in which creativity can be easily scaled down to choice, consumerism, combination or competition as we choose, consume, combine or compete for our social identities.

While this approach might seem to be logical, concerning the concept of culture as a self-aware and self-explanatory system, it obviously underrates or disregards some other aspects of identity. Moreover, it is quite questionable if the cultural aspect of identity is nearly as relevant as it is usually presented, and it can be argued that these other approaches are more important, and maybe fundamental, for our understanding of the world.

The freedom to change one's identity is certainly not the freedom of choice, combination or competition *within* the given cultural platform, however complex it might be, but it is in

understanding and changing the *causes* that generate the platform. As Michel Houellebecq cynically proposes in his novel *Atomised (Elementary Particles)*, freedom is not in the choice between different sexual or gender policies, but it is in the choice of being sexual or asexual, that is, in overcoming sexuality as a biological disposition.

Many artists prefer a distanced, skewed or distorted approach to the identity issues to the culturally accepted or expected ones. Some explore the material aspects of identity such as physical and biological, while the others use the strategies that originate in the etymological sense of the word *individual*, from Latin *individuus*, which means indivisible, the one which can not be shared with the others, the one which defines oneself in an abstract and non-verbal process of becoming and self-determination. Let's take a closer look at some of the artworks that I selected to illustrate this.

### **Overstatement**

One of the smartest and most influential approaches to identity is that of ambivalent over-statement, or over-augmentation, which the German art phenomenon, Kraftwerk, applied in an innovative and intelligent way in the early Seventies. Working within the context of pop-music but acquiring the attitude of self-satisfied, well-situated, middle-class, Mid-European technocrats in their music and in their appearances, they drove many of their contemporaries crazy at the time. They made it very hard to distinguish whether they seriously believed in the values they were promoting, or they were criticizing them. Thus, super-identification becomes a quality in itself.

And, like always in art, Kraftwerk had many predecessors, a particular example being Gilbert and George with their life-long, and ongoing, *Living Sculptures* project which they initiated in the mid Sixties.

But Kraftwerk strategy can be found later as well, for example in Neue Slowenische Kunst, especially in their Laibach musical section, with their use, and abuse, of political ideology, its mechanisms and effects. Laibach's militant, and self-obliterating attitude of collectivism and totalitarianism made them notorious during the Eighties.

### **Ambivalence**

Somewhat similar approach of ambivalently extreme identification with a subject (matter) can be found in Diane Arbus, and in her ability to reveal the quirky, freakish, perverse or decadent nature of her fellow Americans, mixed with a strange and almost repulsive sense of sympathy. She worked as a freelance photographer during the Sixties, which put her in a position to sample the truly great variety of the U.S. culture. The recent attempt to bring her work to the broader audience is Steven Shainberg's 2006 feature *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus*.

If there is a special relationship between mimicry, identification and sympathy, than it can be enjoyed in Duane Hanson's hyperrealist sculptures, also dealing with the American everyday figures.

Or, we can feel something like that in the recent recycling of the strangeness of perception and scale in Ron Mueck's hyperrealist figuration. Mueck's works are usually funny but at the same time, the oddly rescaled vulgarity of their abundant details feels strange and almost threatening.

## **Context**

The similar technique but in different medium produces different feeling. In Ben Gest's large scale, highly detailed composite photographs of friends and relatives in their everyday banality, he renders an unexpected warmth and belonging.

How the situation, and our positioning in it, can become the identity denominator and a playground in itself, Cindy Sherman explored extensively in her immense body of work. Most notably in *Film Stills* series, which re-examine not only the parameters of the female self and self-representation, but also the culturally embedded identity distinctions and similarities between photography and film.

## **Sense**

But the context itself, cultural or whatever, is far from enough to provide us with individual qualities, which is painfully evident in the superficial multitude of our consumerist society. Jake and Dinos Chapman operate exactly with this notion. They are relentless, bitter, offensive or gross, but usually very, very true.

The similar critique, and the questioning of the mediated identity constituents, are in this video of French art collective Pleix, from 2001.

## **Corporeality**

Where Pleix gently touches the (female) sexuality and its cultural positioning, Nobuyoshi Araki unleashes an outrageous *tour de force*. Araki's idiosyncrastic sexism may be controversial and exploitative, but a weirdly profound sense of compassion of his outstanding perceptiveness and photographic technique, manage to turn all that into an ambiguous, uneasy mix, in which we are all either the perpetrators or the accomplices.

Mixing the bodies and architecture in a simple, and yet unbelievably effective and natural way, Spencer Tunick brings us down to the fact that it is extremely difficult for us, and for our bodies, to gain any meaning, let alone dignity and self-respect.

## **Space**

Moreover, the architecture can often acquire much stronger and more persuasive individuality than people. Alexander Apostol demonstrates that paradoxically, by digitally removing the details from the facades of the buildings.

Someone once said that Andreas Gursky's photographs create the impression which the extraterrestrials could experience observing our cultural infrastructure from the deep space. Maybe, but his work is also invested with very human, highly developed and highly intelligent aesthetic sense of combined alienation, compassion and critique.

Sze Tsung Leong does something like that, but with more down-to-the-ground social and urban feeling for intensively capitalizing China.

## **Culture**

Architecture transforms people, but it is still the people who manipulate architecture and our environment in general. The excellent *Postcard* series of Russian art group AES playfully criticizes the cultural anxieties and ideological hegemony struggles that we tend to oversee, or rather deny, in everyday life. Using a simple simulation of the possible West-East conflict aftermath, AES nicely remind us of how culture becomes us, and how hypocritical and prejudiced we truly are.

The hypocrisy, power and corruption of capital, and of the cultural production within it, provide the main ground for Hans Haacke's politically charged, relational art. His works are complex, elaborated essays cracking the appearance, and demystifying the dirty games and shady deals behind many benign, decent-looking or philanthropic corporate campaigns and public projects.

Yes, and The Yes Men, bring that into the realm of tactical activism, assuming the identities of high officials in the world of global finance and multinational corporations, and appearing at their symposia, fairs and gatherings. The Yes Men's pranks and diversions are sometimes goofy, but certainly address the important issues of totalizing and instrumentalizing capital.

## **Medium**

So, if the institutional identity is in the appearance and in our perception of it, the identity of digital image is certainly in the nature of pixel as its core element, and in the mathematical database logic and compression. The recent video works of Takeshi Murata, also an American, deal with these media qualities, although on a purely aesthetic or, rather, formalist level.

Artists are sometimes accused of being opportunistic and superficial in using the technologies in order to create the works that criticize the systems which produced these very technologies. However questionable this issue might be, since artists have been doing that throughout history and often with great achievements, the Graphitti Research Laboratory brings the idea of urban guerilla to a new technical level, which is, well, clean... However, the problem with graphitti urban guerilla could be that it became a business itself, and nobody pays real attention to it anymore. Their demos are fun to watch, though.

## **Code**

Turning the spray can into laser beam maybe redefines the graphitti art, but encoding the video stream from the algorithm surely redefines the video as the medium, and that is what artists like Karl Kleim do. This is one in his series of video works for a collaborative project of Carsten Nicolai, another German artist who uses programming, with Ryuichi Sakamoto.

In my opinion, the algorithm and software define the very identity of video medium. The German artist Robert Seidel made his video work called *\_grau*, by pure programming.

If it might be said that, in respect of identity, these artists and artworks are cool then, creating the 2D MutantZombies with such references in mind, we can be metaphorically designated as bastards of the

cool. Our approach could be considered as a derivative or byproduct of theirs, while our production has its own life with particular interests, points, and scores.

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