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GOING POSTDIGITAL

Presenting and Promoting Digital Art Within Contemporary Digital Culture

Intro

At the closing plenary of ISEA 2016 in Hong Kong, the key consensually agreed points were the significance of facing challenges and the necessity for new strategies in promoting digital art. We acknowledged the homophily in our professional network as one of the crucial weaknesses of contemporary digital art, and as one of the impediments of further establishing and popularizing it. Homophily reflects in the fact that persons tend to predominantly operate and most efficiently communicate within the circles of like-minded people – in our case digital/new media artists, authors and cultural workers. Combined with other glitches of human cognition such as confirmation bias, framing and heuristic reasoning, it contributes to a prevailing illusion in our ‘subjective social reality’ that digital art is widely recognized, well established, adequately studied and evaluated. Digital art is certainly much more present in contemporary culture and more widely covered by the media than it had ever been before, but it remains a fringe of the art world, of the art market (which is itself a minute fraction of global economy,¹ and—most critically—of art education.

With a myriad of unresolved conceptual, academic, technical and economic issues for marginality of digital art, we have already started hyping on post-digital, post-media and post-Internet art in which the complex, often unstable and difficult to understand layers of digital infrastructure are taken by the artists as permanent or indefinitely granted utilities of everyday life. These artistic interventions and aestheticizations of

¹ Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

digital culture at once utilize the means of digital technology and thematize the phenomenology of digital paradigm. Regardless of how its present nomenclature may be misleading and how its current theoretical handling may be uneven or dubious, this divergent artistic production is real and momentous, it contributes to digital art and—being well received by the mainstream art world—it both enriches and complicates the cultural identity of digital art.² Post-digital also makes it clear that today (as indeed ever before) it does not suffice to just be keen, enthusiastic or plainly opportunistic in presenting digital art but that we need to continuously think up and update a repertoire of intelligent strategies which simultaneously promote digital art, educate on it, and incite the broad audience into layered contextualization and critical appreciation of this substantial creative enterprise.

TRACE

Together with taking seriously the initiative of the closing plenary at ISEA 2016, this was my principal motivation for the exhibition project *TRACE: Wayfinding in Contemporary New Media Art* that I curate with Anna Novakov and Yvonne Senouf. TRACE features the artists who draw inspiration from different forms of situational awareness, transforming them into complex new platforms for reflection and discourse. The idea was to combine divergent artistic approaches to the concepts of orientation and wayfinding with a complex but accessible gallery setting and educational activities. With 10 artworks by 15 artists, the project premiered at MoCA Salon in Belgrade, proceeding to Pro Arts Gallery in Oakland, California, and leading up to the Museum of Human Evolution in Burgos, Spain. Through every iteration, TRACE is redeveloped with different configurations of artworks, educational programs, online and printed documentation.

With 10 artworks by 15 artists, the project premiered at MoCA Salon Belgrade on 30 March 2018. It includes a printed brochure and a catalogue, a video trailer and a dedicated web page, all bilingual, and the complete project will be presented in a

² Paul, Christiane. Collecting the Digital — Materials, Markets, Models. Media Art and the Art Market Symposium. LENTOS Kunstmuseum Linz, OCT-10-2016. Accessed.
<http://interface.ufg.ac.at/blog/media-art-and-the-art-market-speakers/#Paul>, Video:
<https://vimeo.com/192670584>

book published by McNally Jackson in New York. Participating artists at MoCA Salon in Belgrade were Yin-Ju Chen (Taiwan) and James T. Hong (USA, Taiwan), Badfaith VR [Shaun Gladwell (Australia, Great Britain) and Leo Faber (Australia)], Dejan Grba (Serbia), Jonathan Harris (USA) and Greg Hochmuth (USA), Ron Hutt (USA), Nicolas Maigret (France) and Brendan Howell (USA), Julian Palacz (Austria), Kelly Mark (Canada), Alexander Schellow (Germany), syntfarm [Vladimir Todorović (Singapore) and Andreas Schlegel (Singapore)].

TRACE at MoCA Salon in Belgrade proved to be a hit, surpassing by far our expectations. With daily average of 15 visitors, plus groups of 20-30 visitors at scheduled guided exhibition tours on weekends (handled by the MoCA staff) this is a significantly high gallery/museum exhibition visit frequency for Belgrade. By request, I gave guided exhibition tours myself to the students and professors from School for Design in Belgrade, several prep art schools in Belgrade (collectively), PhD students at the Faculty of Fine Arts (FFA) in Belgrade, Faculty of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, Art History Department at Philosophical Faculty in Belgrade, New Media department at the Academy of the Arts in Novi Sad and Painting Department at the FFA in Belgrade.

Activities included a joint lecture by Anna Novakov and Ron Hutt, my lecture *One Ping Only: Wayfinding in Contemporary New Media Art*, which had a full house visit and great feedback, a talk on *TRACE* with chief curator of MoCA Salon Una Popović, digital art journalist Tamara Vučenović, digital artist Uroš Krčadinac and me, with great attendance, twice the normal running time and great feedback, and a promo of the exhibition catalogue on the last day of the exhibition run. Due to the high interest and attendance of the audience, the MoCA extended TRACE for three weeks over its original run of two months.

Insights

Should this somewhat surprising success give us hope or pause for rethinking? Well, actually, both! Hope, because it shows that a sincere, devoted and transparent curatorial approach in digital art can succeed when it unfolds through a carefully conceptualized, methodically prepared, professionally executed and well-maintained exhibition project. Pause, because the complexity of digital art, digital culture and the

world in general makes us appreciate the unpredictability of such elaborate enterprises. The history has always been the study of unforeseen consequences, but its inherent volatility should encourage us to further develop our cognitive, epistemological and emotional capabilities for well-informed anticipation – as long as we love and respect what we are doing.

As practitioners and proponents of digital art working freelance and with manifold institutions dedicated to digital art and culture, we are responsible for dissemination of knowledge, for raising awareness and—more importantly—for qualitatively improving the understanding of digital art.

Diversification of curatorial, theoretical and educational methodologies is crucial for discovering the best suited contexts, collaborative environments and communicative means for digital art. It has become more feasible and more effective by such factors as the enhanced accessibility to and manipulability of information, the speed and ease of systematic resource building, and the power of networking, which all significantly evolved with the digital technology. These decisive factors and layers of digital culture set up a strong context for critical assessment of some long-established academic practices that have become inert, counterproductive and damaging to the promotion of digital art.

Let me conclude with perhaps a contrarian idea that within this context we should strive for the more practical distribution of knowledge in digital culture by overcoming the exclusivity of many institutions such as conferences and journals. Enforcing the originality and restricting the redistribution of papers by the majority of authors while recycling the celebrity op-eds and keynotes, this elitism is superficial and ethically dubious. It is essentially a mechanism for monopolizing the intellectual property, whose final effects are atomization and parochialism. It cannot be justified neither by the rhetoric of preserving the standards of excellence in a fragmented academic landscape of digital art, nor by the commercial rationale in a highly versatile digital economy. The standards of academic excellence should support—not prevent—access to knowledge,³ and publishers/organizers can select from a rich palette of modern business models that rely on broadening the availability of their

³ For example, by peer-reviewing the papers pre-published within certain time scope, conferences and journals would foster their elaboration and improvement while the readership would be free to compare and choose between their published versions.

intellectual production. Paraphrasing the expression often credited to Stewart Brand:⁴ *Information on digital art wants to be free*, but information itself means little without knowledge and insight. Going postdigital, we are determining their freedom as well.

⁴ Wagner, R. Polk. *Information Wants to Be Free: Intellectual Property and the Mythologies of Control*. (PDF essay). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2003.