THE WORK OF ART IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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To my beloved cat Beandip
VITA

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One of the most important goals of my MFA Thesis Exhibition is an attempt to establish a new form of communication using digital media as a catalyst of the aesthetic endeavor. By “new” I mean a situation where the audience is an active participant in the project—making decisions and guiding the development of the project. The structure of this project, at first glance, might remind you of the structure of a book. In this case however, the first impression is deceiving. Despite some visual similarities, the main difference between the format of a book and the format of my electronic media project is that this electronic format makes it possible for readers to process the artwork, to interact with it, and to participate in changing it as well as changing its original message. The digital medium is probably the only medium which is not “written in stone.” Digital information is stored as a sequence of electric impulses, not as statically organized matter like sculpture, painting, photography, film. It is always alive, always in the process of restructuring its data and is always open for rewriting or updating. The inherent flexibility of electronic media intrigues me. The main conceptual feature of electronic art, is its potential for a radical alteration of the artist-audience relation. It accelerates the change of the role of the author as universal authority, who is in total control over the narrative and aesthetic part of the art work, into an organizer of the environment, a keeper of the
functionality of the work. This change has remarkable social consequences since it challenges the monopoly of truth, a structure which keeps the artist as the authorized storyteller and the audience as the listeners, or receivers of aesthetic deliveries. The question, “What did the artist want to say with this art work?” lacks validity inside the interactive environment unless it is reformulated into the question “What values did the spectator comprehend through the interaction with this object of art?”. Now the artwork has ascended from a single static message into a complex narrative, a laboratory of messages.

Needless to say, a growing accessibility of new technologies, especially those in the field of telecommunications, opens doors to a whole new world of possibilities. What fascinates me about the internet is the creation of a sense of community, based on the ability to send or receive information through the electronic mail from anywhere in the world. National borders, spatial distance, cultural differences are irrelevant when it comes to being “on-line.” The limitations of electronic media, like the absence of the actual (three dimensional) artwork, the rules of digital logic, as well as the slowness of the withdrawal of information seems to be a minimum price one has to pay for the advantages of the media.

My project consists of two basic parts: “Cybergallery “ and “My Family Artist.” Cybergallery is a display of visual art, as well as, narrative or virtual projects. It has three major sections: “<gallery>”, “Virtual Worlds” and “Other Projects”. The </gallery> is a place for digitally altered and thematically oriented art. It functions as a gallery in a traditional sense by “displaying” a digitized version of actual works as well as works of art existing only in a digital format. “Virtual Worlds” is a site for interactive projects. Currently it is occupied by the Virtual Monument project which is an interactive story, dedicated to questioning the symbolism of power which is inextricably bound to the monumental objects of art. Viewers have the power to change the existing landscape by finding ways to interface with the static structure
of the narrative. The project which currently occupies the main gallery space and which is a central feature of the gallery section is: “The Paradoxes of the Perception of Fast Food.”

The central idea of the show in the gallery is an attempt to define a true place of fast food in American society. I have been working around the idea of food for approximately two years now (since I came to this country). My interest in food as an object of art was shaped by a few major factors. First of all, efficient nutrition was a matter of a vital importance in my life for a quite a while. Later I realized that food is less about nutrition and more about identity. Being an “outsider” to American society, I have noticed some things which might be too common to be noticeable to Americans. It is obvious that food has lost its pastoral simplicity and became a subject of communication. From the provider of nutrition, food often emerges as a sign carrying information. Social climate directly influences our menus. The growth of conservative regionalism has influenced the revival of the philosophy of “good old days” and as a result one sees the popularity of old fashioned hamburgers and country style buffets. The emergent “practical rationalism” has accelerated a health-food boom. Sacred food which is used in religious ceremonies is another example of the transformation of food into message. In the case of fast food speed of preparation as well as speed of service are not the main issues. Fast food is rather a matter of style (symbolic representation) than of the taste. The main quality of fast food is an attributive one. It is a symbol of the time. Fast food is a symbol of the post-war America, a country driven by the criteria of speed, expansion, and consumption. Going to a fast food restaurant is as unique a social ritual as going to church or to the gallery. Besides the practical purpose, a visit to a fast food restaurant is a symbolic act of belonging to the current time, the same way like a visit to the church serves as an act of the belonging to a community. In my virtual exhibition I try to emphasize the symbolic quality of fast food. On the other hand, fast food lacks the aura usually associated
with the symbolic object, because the utilitarian value of the food overshadows any symbolism. The contradiction between fast food as a symbol and fast food as an object of consumption is a goal of this series of works.

"Other Projects" is a virtual chapter, designed to embrace the correlation between written and the visual narratives. It includes two projects: "The Slippers Project" and "The Chewing Gum Project." They are an autobiographic mélange which combines my real life experiences and fictions. In addition, I have included a few technical sections such as: "Mailbox", "Information" and "Navigation Tools." "Mailbox" is a catalog for viewers comments and suggestions. It also functions as an interactive place in this project. Similar to the Mailbox, but organized as a dialogue is the "Ask the Artist" page under the Information section. It consists of questions which are addressed to the "generic" artist, and answers to those questions. One can send his or her question right from the page by clicking a hyperlinked text "e-mail us." "Mailbox" allows spectators to view their comments instantly on the top of the Mailbox page, due to the bin mailing technique. The other information, presented in the "Information" section embraces topics such as the copyright policy of the project, as well as references and acknowledgments. The "Navigation Tools" describes and demonstrates the function of certain icons and the buttons which are used in this project.

"My Family Artist" (MFA) is the second half of this project and is a separate entity. This part is more like a framework, a place where something artistic could happen, rather than a work of art in a traditional sense. This half of the project is organized like an advertising campaign. It uses exaggerated, psycho-optimist language, the same language which is used in advertising, and has a full set of blunt tricks to "catch" viewers. On the other hand, MFA sends a clear message about the role of an artist in society. In the core of "My Family Artist" lies an idea of the aesthetic representation similar to or
simulating the procedure of political representation. The artists, members of the MFA, are suppose to be the aesthetic representatives, just like senators are political representatives or lawyers are legal representatives. The absence of representation i.e. deficiency of public interest means a lack of art's legitimate power. Moreover, it indicates a degradation of the social value of art, and it clearly shows that art ceases to exist as an active force in the formation of social identity. MFA requires an active participation in the project by the viewer. In order to move MFA to the next level, viewer’s have to make certain decisions. People delegating power to the chosen artist do not influence his/her aesthetic decisions, they take the artist as he/she is and receive a virtual property in the form of access to the ideal (art) through their aesthetic representative (their Family Artist). Initially set as a political parody, a working paradigm, aesthetic representation reveals the very origins of the power and authority, as well as the act of public representation. This is an attempt to rehabilitate the innocuous relations between artists and society, and to revitalize public interest in art. These are among the objectives of this part of the project.

Since the beginning of the master’s program at OSU, I have been trying to find an appropriate medium for my ideas. Actually, I started my searching much earlier: the decision to apply to a graduate program far from my home country (Lithuania) was motivated by the deep wish to experience a different culture, become familiar with different forms of creativity, as well as to get in touch with the whole spectrum of new media. Technically, I was enrolled in the painting department, and I am graduating from the painting program now, but the evolution of my ideas and philosophy took me to a different discipline. An intensive exploration of different techniques, media surfing was one of my accomplishments chosing my studies here. I started my involvement in the field of computer generated art during the third quarter of my studies at OSU. The first step was research on the various types of communication between viewer and artist and how new
technologies influence this communication. Searching for models in
the history of art, I found many narratives ranging from horror to
seduction, from disturbance to euphoria. Generally those forms of
communication were derived from the normative values of society at
that particular time. In the era of electronic transmission, the main
difference in communication is the absence of one source of truth.
Linear structure of information has been broken apart and a burst of
zillions of microsources of information has created a pluralistic
environment, rather than a hierarchy. Truth, a dogmatic quality of
hierarchic structure, is replaced with multicentered environments by
interpretation. In fact, absence of the truth itself becomes a new
paradigm. After digital reproduction was introduced, even such a clear
notion as documentary evidence was jeopardizes. This situation raises
questions about freedom and responsibility, major ethical questions for
a person dealing with social values as the art.

I chose painting as a major in high school. I used to spend 3-4
hours a day doing painting. In the fifth year of my active encounter
with painting, I found this media to be perfectly suitable to represent
some of my ideas and emotions, but very inappropriate to express
others. For example, painting perfectly recreates what is considered to
be the emotions of a certain archetype of a human being. I use the word
“certain” to emphasize the variety of archetypes in general and my
focus on one in particular. This type is one which might be
caracterized through his relationship to self and whose social identity
is built on the egocentric grid which is based on the notion of me and
other as opposite poles. This type of human is in a constant process of
autoanalysis and has a remarkable habit of seeing life from the depths
of ego. The exaggerated focus on expression, meaning self-expression,
serves as a social legitimization of an inner monologue: “I, therefore I
am; I am Myself” with numerous variations like “I feel myself,
therefore I am” or “I think myself, therefore I am” (the imperative
message of expressionism). I am not talking about painting as a form of
documentation of reality, as it was until the discovery and
development of the camera, but rather about painting as a form of self-
expression or expression of the idea of self. Painting as an expression of
individuality is still a basic academic tradition at OSU, as well as other
universities in this country, and probably the main method of teaching
art anywhere in the world. That is why I found artists to be so eager to
keep an individuality of style and to be so vigilant about the
uniqueness of their artistic approaches. The act of painting itself is a
sort of withdrawal from the social fabric into the zone of privacy.
Privacy becomes a warrant and a license for the individual. Advanced
capitalism perfectly reveals the intentions and the values of modern
art. Withdrawal into the realm of privacy becomes a maneuver made
in order to be able to apprehend reality as external to one's own
individuality, glancing from the ivory tower of the private. I found
painting to be an ideal tool for the aesthetic justification of the system
of values I have just described above. Painting possesses the basic
components of escapism into the self, observationism, and
emotionalism. I didn't like it. I tried to make my paintings look less
individual and less emotional, but they just looked like "bad"
paintings: they lost their messages and it was not clear, why I chose
painting as a medium. I felt locked in the ivory tower, with no ability
to communicate, and with no parole. Finally I realized that the battle
was lost: nothing is wrong with painting just my ideas and expectations
did not seem to fit the medium, so I moved on.

The aspect of painting that bothered me most while I was
struggling with it, was historicism or involuntary memorism. The
whole situation of painting is soaked with memory and history. What
texture to choose? What style of paint application of paint to pursue?
What color palette to use? What subject matter and the personal style
of the author? I decided to suspend, as much as possible, the pressure
of tradition, to cut out the historic strings attached to the product of art,
and to launch into an unspecified, unmarked area (at least it looked
like that at that time). By choosing a new media, I hoped to be able to reinforce the direct impact of the artwork. I believed this would let me clarify the initial message of the object of art and would sweep away the burden of tradition. I thought that by using aesthetically unconventional media or utilitarian objects I would be able to escape the aesthetic preconditions of the “high genre” and express the message in the most vital way.

The group of works created using meat and books (prior to computer projects) was another attempt of mine to deal with the dichotomy of media. In my opinion, the most significant object I made during that period, was “Meatbook” (1994). It is a simulation of a book produced out of meat and vinyl. The actual “text” is a sequence of thin stripes of ham sealed in between two layers of a clear vinyl. The “pages” are bound together and two sheets of aluminum form the cover. It has all the features of an actual book: preface, summary and word from the editor. The title page was made out of wide strips of ham. The main idea of the work is to question the notions of a message, and written information, as well as attempt to understand how the medium influences the narrative. Another work, similar in concept is the “Fifty cut across and salted books; fifty cut along and smoked books” (1995) which consists of two big bags stuffed with the cut up books. Each of the bags has fifty books in it. One bag is stuffed with cut and salted books, the other one is filled with the cut and smoked ones.

After a while I figured out that in the cases were I used raw materials, the artwork was automatically presumed by the spectator to be a part of the romantic-environmental, “naturistic” tradition. Nobody cared that, maybe, I meant something completely different. Whatever I tried, media was still an initial code and a conductor of the message. It carried that “background meaning” which was the main content people were able to read in my work. Unfortunately my intentions were totally melted down and fused into the preconditions...
of the medium. Finally I found myself in a situation not far from the one I had already experienced while painting: the same tight net of stylistic similarities to someone else’s works, the same feeling that I was about to be washed away in one direction or the other down the stream of trend, losing my original intentions. I was not afraid to be associated with any tendency in art, but I really tried to avoid ideas I did not intend to represent. Unfortunately, I always felt that I could not identify with my work: something was always out of my control, something was always different than my initial intentions.

I decided to revise my approach to art. I thought maybe I conceptualize too much. I asked my fellow painters how they do art. Do they put any meanings in the things they produce, or do they discover meanings while producing those things? I did not get any direct answers, but the tendency of the answers was to relate the art making method to the way which leads off with a general feeling of direction yet influenced by the endless encounters with the medium. It seemed to me that in most cases the initial concept of the work serves as a trigger or an alibi, or a sort of social justification of the desire to create the object of art. The artist is driven by the logic and the language of a medium he/she happens to be emerged in. The initial inspiration is blown away and replaced by the rules of the grammar of the medium used. Eventually, the whole work of art is entangled and fused with the proto-narrative of the media.

I started to think that maybe clarity (real or just imaginary, does not really matter) or the so called “initial idea of the work of art” is a trick invented by and injected into the art by art critics and the other eager professionals of historic consciousness. Maybe phenomena like media or style do not require external affirmations and are valid and valuable with no extra authority? Sometimes it seems that the criteria of quality of the product of art is entirely assembled outside the zone of actual art production. It is brewed in the laboratories of social criticism.
and political activism and often causes a confusion and tension among the different aesthetic camps. But such an alternative as a deconstructive rejectionism does not lead anywhere else beyond the nihilist nullification of narrative. The position that art or any other activity has to have separate criteria is a political decision itself -- it is a definite move from globalism to localism, as well as a renouncement of the universal standards (ethic) for the sake of the absolute autonomy of the professional mind. On one hand it seems unquestionably important to be conscious and to care a great deal about the main actualities in society and to represent those vibrant issues in art, but on the other hand art making is an engaging enough process in itself and the marks of the social significance like idea of the artwork or subject matter of it sometimes are not needed to justify the very act of art making. Sometimes it seems worth it just to try make things nicer with no further alibis. Art is like a laboratory of the imagination, but with no clear method of research, with no clear subject and with no clear idea why this research is being made.

The question of a dichotomy between freedom of expression and social responsibility is problematic. Any “either... or” type of questioning is a dead end, because it initially presumes mutual exclusion and leads to an inevitable contradiction created by the question itself. An alternative seems to work pretty decently in this case. I think that the social responsibility of the artist lies in an ability to be able to analyze himself or herself as well as all major social structures. Social responsibility is fruitful only when it comes with the ability to analyze oneself and to question all sort of authority -- internal as well as external. If “free” self expression turns to be free from analysis of its implications, this expression becomes just a psychologic selftherapy. In that way selfexpression turns out to be expression of beliefs, or fears, or of other signs of social belonging. Or, most often, it turns out to be a repetition of the style one associated oneself with, or is associated with.
The dogma of social responsibility closed off from analysis of the social circumstances in which the artist happens to reside, reminds me of the conditions of the artist of orthodox societies. In orthodox societies, art serves as a visual manifestation of the higher authority. In terms of communication, the autonomy of the spectator is being ignored as well as freedom of interpretation -- art marks an absolute power of the ideal over everything else. The spectator is the direct subject of that power, not even a passive observer but a prerequisite participant, existing inside the structure which art is requested to represent. Having once lived in one of those societies I can say that in most cases attempts to establish a "morally improved style of communication" leads to completely different results. The artificially created style was barely used, people were focused on a semi-legal or illegal sources of information ignoring the official "information superhighway": the fading rotoprint copy of the banned author was rated a hundred times higher than a glossy hardback copy of an official writer. Social realism (SR) was just another artificial construction. Many artists took it as an inevitable condition, the price they have to pay in order to be able to represent things they wanted. On the other hand, the audience was more interested in the personal variations than in the style itself, because style was the license to create and to exhibit art legally: the rules of the game of the police state. If the style ideally is a convention between both communicating sides, SR in this sense was not a style but an attempt by the government to create a style. The personal styles inside SR were more important for both communicating sides than the SR's style itself. Eventually SR as a style, failed. It was taken more or less seriously as a style abroad mainly.

I have focused my attention on style here, because it is an important issue for me. For a long time I have distrusted the "high quality" and high scale artwork which radiate power and perfection, because those works of art usually were officially funded pieces of propaganda. The demonstration of power was a symbol of corruption.
In terms of style and aesthetic methods those works of art were pretty close to activities such as the military parades on Red Square on the 7th of November. I certainly agree with the eco-feminist critique of the modernism as a discourse driven by an individualist aggression, a desire to dominate through scale as well as perfection and style.

Style in art is probably more important than the medium. Style in many cases serves as a safe haven for one who needs a social affiliation through art. Style is like a club membership which might be fashionable or embarrassing depending on how highly rated the style is at that moment. To engage in the style which bears signs of a popular discourse is a safe and comfortable way to establish oneself as an artist. Style in this case turns out to be an author. Adair's "The death of the author" (1992) comes to my mind as a kind of resurrection of the author, though in a comic, anonymous way. In general I see nothing wrong with being associated with a style, but I personally had a hard time trying to find a perfectly suitable style for myself, so I just kept on wandering around and looking for the right one.

After my long and unsuccessful efforts to find an appropriate style, I figured out a tendency: whenever I started doing an object of art it turned to be a subject of some particular style. Eventually it appeared to me that the whole package of the message, aesthetics, and values which I naively believed I managed somehow to inject into the work, had been hopelessly altered, diffused into the metanarrative of the style. I lost an interest in making things when I discovered the limitations of the style or of the media I had chosen. My real interest was in keeping an open dialogue, challenging the style rather than building a sealed monologue and nourishing the style. In both cases, while painting or making objects I felt an overwhelming presence of the tradition and the style hovering over the works I created. So overwhelming was this presence, that I couldn't resist the temptation
to cross the boundaries of the genre and the media one more time. I turned to new and unexplored media, one not institutionalized by tradition.

New technologies carry relatively little discourse yet. Using Benjamin's (1968) definition they don't have much of an aura, like traditional media do. I assumed I would be able to deal with more or less neutral matter when I approached new media. One could compare it to moving to a new apartment and placing all the things in any order you like, as opposed to moving into someone's house and accepting an already established order. New media, situated as it is in art now, reminds me of the development of the camera over a hundred years ago: the same enthusiasm, the same distrust and suspicion from the side of the traditional arts and the same dilemma: is it art or is it something else? The nature of the computer distinguishes it from other tools useful in creating works of art. The ability to simulate the real world not just to represent it, puts digital media in a different position compared with other media. In my opinion, blind copying of traditional media like painting or drawing with the computer is a worthless exercise—the computer is always left hopelessly behind the original medium. The rapidly expanding possibilities created by the electronic telecommunication networks is exciting. I think that the computer is doing what the camera did in its own time: introducing a new quality of symbolism, one which demands a new approach toward reality itself. The digital language has its own specific logic in the same way as other languages have. Its style is governed by the logic of the operation of the computer. Needless to say, it creates its own mythology. Even if it is too early to talk about the "digital nation" yet, the accelerating "digitalization" of society is obvious. In spite of its limitations, the computer is a great force for the creation of new types of relations between people, new "neighborhoods" and a new informational environment. The switch from 3D objects to the computer generated images which I drastically experienced a year ago,
was influenced by a strong belief in the internet and the CD media as a potential breakthrough in the field of interpersonal communication.

I feel that the two years spent in a masters level studies program at the OSU Department of Art clarified my vision of contemporary art, and gave me a clear sense of the direction I have to follow to develop my true professional potential. The direction I have taken during the last three quarters of study is truly enjoyable and stimulates my imagination in the most inspiring way I have ever experienced.
REFERENCES

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PLATE II

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mixed media, 1994
PLATE IV

The Parade
computer graphics, 1995
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Pizza
computer graphics, 1995
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PLATE VII

Fifty cut and salted books
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PLATE VIII

The Steelburger
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USA
For U.S. addresses only

A Poststamp Project
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X-Rated
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The Birth of the Steelburgers
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PLATE XI

The Temple of Fast Food
computer graphics, 1995
A Sick Hamburger
computer graphics, 1995
PLATE XIII

A Soda Project
computer graphics, 1995