Media and Body Politics

Marina Grzinic

In this essay, Marina Grzinic discusses some of her recent multi-media projects, produced in collaboration with Aina Smid, and her views on the effects of mass communications upon life in both Japan and Slovenia, once part of the Yugoslav republic, but since 1991, a new European state.

Luna Park

In November 1997 Aina Smid and I, both from Ljubljana, Slovenia presented an interactive video installation with the title *Luna Park* at the Intercommunication Center (ICC) in Tokyo, as part of the first ICC Media Biennial exhibition. The installation focused both visually and theoretically on the ICC Biennial organiser's proposed topic of communication/ miscommunication.

Luna Park was a video interactive project which played almost literally on the effect that digitial and numbered cards play in the processes of communication/miscommunication. To live properly today we have to have and use such digital/ numbered cards, to go to the bank, for example, or to enter a hotel room. The visitors of *Luna Park*, instead of a modern plastic digital card, were given a piece of paper with a personal number printed in red. The red colour and the old technology, a slow printed device which delivered the number, were used to underline the artists' socialist background.

After receiving their personal number, the visitor or user had to insert the number in a computer installed in a huge red box or room. As a result of entering the numbers, a multi-screen projection began. This was a unique, personal story composed from images about the war in ex-Yugoslavia, history, love, sex etc. which were assembled randomly from extracts of our other video and film works, selected and edited by a computer.

To each number given to the visitor, there belonged a unique narrative approximately two minutes in length. When the same number was entered into the computer, the same two minute narrative was replayed. In this way the visitor or user could replay, re-memorize and repeat his or her personal narrative indefinitely. As only one visitor at a time was allowed to enter the red room, it was not possible for anyone else to see the projection of another person's narrative from outside or inside the red room.

Marina Grzinic and Aina Smid *Luna Park* (interactive video installation)

With *Luna Park* we attempted to grasp the problem at the heart of the communication/miscommunication idea, given the computer's random generation of both personal numbers and personal narratives. The visitor achieved his or her media space as both individual and personal which is one of the most difficult tasks of any art media project, due to the general and constant globalization tendency of mass and digital media, but at the same time he or she realized that this most inner private space was something completely randomly generated. It was a product of the machine and not of any deep empathetic inter-communication. The structure of his or her intimate space, and the level of communication within it, was a result of a "*real time*" machine-generated miscommunication. To underline this short circuit error in communication/miscommunication, the computer itself from time to time randomly selected in place of his or her personal narrative an interface error situation. This I called a **situation of an encounter with the traumatic real of today** disrupting the almost perfect media world presented through this encounter with an error message or with a communication/miscommunication mistake. In this way, the traumatic real came to meet the viewer inside the red room.

Globalisation and Tribalisation

Trinh T.Minh-ha has proposed a model for re-thinking Asian space and the so-called third world through the concept of the "***inappropriate/d Other***". This can also be seen as a possible useful tool to develop specific concepts of reading of the former Eastern European territory. It is time to find and to re-write paradigms of specific spaces, arts and media productions in Eastern Europe. The whole of Eastern Europe is functioning like a symptom of the developed West especially in media or when using avantgarde media and art strategies. In examining the parallells between East/West, we can find in the Eastern European media and art productions important examples of perverted and/or symptomatic logic of Western media strategies and visual representation connected in quite different ways. This can be shown with the example of the use of pornographic representations, which is something that is not generally regarded as acceptable in the West because pornography is seen as the part of the commercialisation or consumerism of both the body and the media. In Eastern Europe, however, if we use pornography or pornographic visualization in the media as a political stance, as a form of resistance to political

Marina Grzinic and Aina Smid *Bilocation* **(1990)   video**

conformity rather than sexual liberalisation, then we get a completely inverted reading of what pornography represents.

In the same context, tribalisation can be also seen from another positive standpoint. While the connection through the mass media of underground tribal groups is often presented as a form of tribalisation and frequently seen as a specific case of globalisation, I propose to reflect these processes differently: to see the production of the 'global' connected just or merely to the growth in mass media communications, and, in the case of tribalisation, to argue class issues still form the main system underlying a 'tribes' identity.

In ex-Yugoslavia when tribalisation was used to talk about genocide then one realized, for example, just how dangerous the use of this term can be. Most of the serious analysis that has been done concerning the war in ex-Yugoslavia has reached the point where it is actually very clear who started the war and why and that this war was a very classical war for territories. It was started by the Serbian military and political elite. However, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, tribalism became a very good shelter to hide the real reasons that were behind it. To represent the war in

Bosnia and Herzegovina through the myth of tribal groups that once had equal rights and now are fighting against eachother became a very good way to shift the world's gaze away from the actual reasons for fighting.

In this sense a stereotype is always functional and effective. Because a stereotype forms a kind of pattern that allows you to hide everything that is generated outside the stereotype. This is how tribalism was used in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a recourse to myth, as a means to hide the facts and as a sort of mythical re-reading or re-interpreting of the social and political space in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

When the war started in Slovenia, on 25th of June 1991, and though it lasted for just 10 days, I remember that in the early morning when I switched on the TV and it was announced that the war had started, two years before I had watched similarly the Rumanian Revolution through Belgrade live TV. During the war, I watched TV a great deal trying to get as much information as possible from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When the war was at its height, it was not possible to get up-to-date information, only CNN and the rather stereotyped forms of mass corporate information. I

Marina Grzinic and Aina Smid
Labyrinth(1993) video

remember in the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina when the ex-Yugoslav army kidnapped the president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegovic, it happened that the kidnapped Alija Izetbegovic, the kidnappers and the members of the remaining Bosnia and Herzegovina political group in Sarajevo could all talk on TV only or while the TV was broadcast live ! So, we were sitting in our living room watching something both peculiar and horrible at the same time on the TV. These moments were important because they changed our view of the media and of the public sphere. It is not possible to look at TV in an innocent way anymore.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrated also in which directions it is possible today to develop the new and the old media spaces. Cyberspace can not be only a space for 'free' communication as it is also a hybrid and highly political space. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina showed this clearly because for political reasons it was not possible to use satellite communications, instead the main channel of communications was operated by radio amateurs who spread information and reported live from the frontlines of the war. Individuals broadcasting via so-called amateur radio equipment were often used directly on Slovenian TV's prime newstime. With the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was possible to see actually a reversal of the hierarchy of media - through cyberspace, internet, radio - because the radio broadcasting was more important than all the internet tools and/or satellite connections. Sometimes the television couldn't show anything else and instead

allowed the viewer to hear the real audio from the amateur radio broadcasts. So, in this way, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina could teach us a lot about media technology, about its re-distribution and about the political effects of communications, if we were not looking at it solely from the ethical or moral standpoint, for when we are confronted with the atrocities committed there, we became speechless.

Monsters

Simultaneous collective processes of reception and communication in cyberspace have become the central determining metaphor for the new media environment. What is happening on the Internet is increasingly seen and utilised as the "***new***" public space. The Internet and the World Wide Web are becoming the spaces which are not only parallel to the existing public one, but are increasingly becoming a substitute for it. So called public opinion is being formulated via the Internet and is perhaps replacing any actual public opinion. The process of substituting the '*res publica*' with random information and the "***making***" of public opinion with re-forwarding of e-mails communications is a gradual one.[1]

One of the primary questions concerning the Internet and WWW has been to identify (following the fall of the Berlin wall) who are the old and new actors in the construction of this '**Brave New World**' and who it is possible to rename today as the '***World Wide Web***'? Generally speaking, two broad lines of critical thought can be detected which form positioning matrices in this debate. The first emphasises the individuals or groups, acting as a kind of entity which has

MarinaGrzinic and Aina Smid *Three Sisters* **(1992) video**

neither a fixed historical nor geographical position, while consciously taking the position of a counter-culture. This position I name "***The Scum of Society Matrix***". However, this "***The Scum of Society Matrix***" refers principally to the positioning of the so-called critical Western European and North American participants, users and online community circuits on the WWW who form a kind of parasitic body trying to get everything possible from the social structures that had already been established. "***The Scum of Society Matrix***" proposes a new autonomous economy and new structures developed from the appropriation and restructuring of the so-called old ones. It proposes to go back to writing only (e-mail boxes), as a possible counter-culture intercommunication strategy and has little interest in improving the Internet, in so far as they wish to erase the use of pictures and graphics generated by the pushy Internet software industry into the background. With such a utopian mind, however, it is possible to find strategies for fighting and acting, not just simply reproducing through technology.

However, as Lambert Wilson, alias Hakim Bey, stated in the lecture at the Nettime meeting *Beauty and The East* [2] in Ljubljana in 1997, it seems that the second world is erased and what is left is the first and third world. Instead of the second world, Bey argued, there is a big hole from which one jumps into the third. I will call this hole and the second line of thought "***The Matrix of Monsters***", as a travesty of the general title of the Nettime conference *Beauty and The East* (that was already a paraphrase of the fairytale title *The Beauty and the Beast*!!). When it comes to the differences between East and West, it has to be made clear that the actors from '***the black hole***' the so-called Eastern Europeans' critical WWW users want not simply to mirror the first world "***the developed capitalist societies***", but to articulate and interpret another proper position in this changed constellation. It is quite telling that Eastern Europeans want to be perceived, not as an image (even a hole!), but as articulated actors of this world. Since 1991, the new actors that have emerged in Eastern Europe do not want to simply adopt the mask of either self or others offered by previously dominant narratives of identity and politics. 1991 is significant as a date because this is imposed on the Eastern Europeans' as the year which today denotes without exception '*le passage a l'acte*' (the passage and the action) toward freedom and democracy. "***The Monsters***" insist on difference - a critical difference within and not as a special classification method marking the process of grounding differences, such as apartheid, as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests. The question who is allowed to write about the history of art, culture and politics in the area once known as Eastern Europe has to be posed along with the questions of how and when are these events marked.

At the end of the millennium the two matrices, the "***Scum of Society Matrix***" and the "***Monsters' Matrix***", not only raise questions of reflection and of correspondence, but offer elements of political and analytical intersection that must be discussed and articulated together. Such a proposed re-articulation of the space can be viewed in today's terms as differential, and at the same time, ideological, precisely
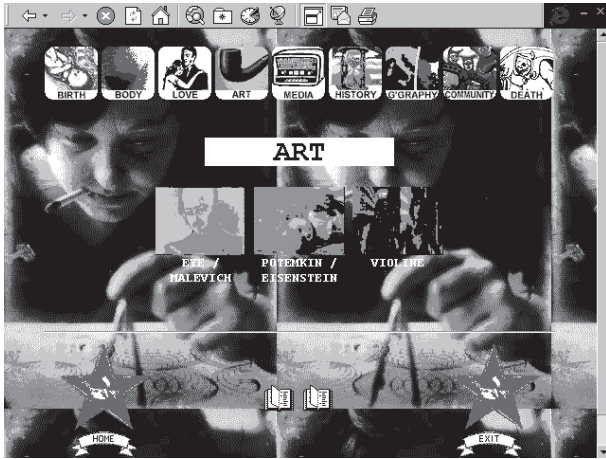
Marina Grzinic and Aina Smid *Axis of Life* **website**
http://www.ljudmila.org/quantum.east
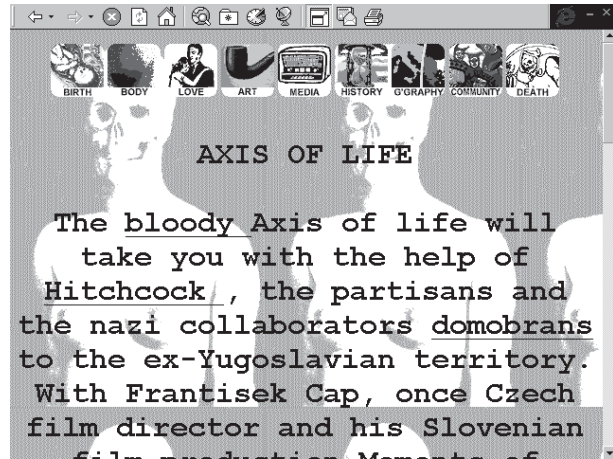
because it remains so invisible and taken for granted. We need to reconsider both the public space, the new media space and the actors, agents and subjects in it in their processes of transformation. We have to ask ourselves, in the manner of Fredric Jameson: what space, which actors, whose agents and what subjects?

Axis of Life

Axis of Life is a site produced by Aina Smid and myself specifically for the web and there it finds the primary reason to exist.[3] The "*webness*" and the "*netness*" of the communication structure are important structural elements of this specific site. *Axis of Life* paraphrases the so called fast food consumer web community. On the "*menu*" of *Axis of Life* the user finds the following topics: birth, body, love, art, media, history, geography, community and death. The new form of imaginary community is generated virtually through the specific way in which these different topics are selected and surfed. The site is an attempt to reintegrate in a critical, almost political and diacritical way, the content of the art material distributed through WWW.

If the WWW is a specific community, where millions are wired and searching for new information, desires and sites or trying to discover possible interfaces, new shifts and paths - one of the questions we pose, as artists, social activities and cyborgpolitical entities, is how can define the basic elements of this wired condition? How is possible today to construct a new individual responsibility without a superficial morality and pathos? These two questions are at the base of the concept developed in the website *Axis of Life*. What is additionally important is that most of the topics listed by this specific site offer a new visual experience for the "waste" members of the WWW community i.e. East Europeans. In this project, we challenge the idea of the WWW that is supposed to be a "web" without borders, bringing up in this specific site political, social borders and shifts generated in the field of art which drive our minds, and bodies. The site is structured using specific images concerning the so called EAST post-socialist context : the history, art, media, life of Eastern Europe.

Through the site we pose the question of the possible concept of art in the WWW. The way of

surfing proposed by the site is an immersion that avoids any black and white reflection upon the chosen topic. In this respect, for example, the topic of community which is possible to choose on the "menu" of *Axis of Life* brings the netsurfer to two crucial borders: *Virtual Bread* and *Antarctica*. *Virtual Bread* is the significant sign of an anti-community and a counter element of the technoscape abundance, while *Antarctica* is a community without the image or a distopic geographical site. *Axis of Life* is also linked to other sites in such a way as to emphasise as much as possible further political, informational, social and artefactual connections. As every site is an imaginary-symbolical structure, then the linkage provided here to other social and political items, is extremely important as this linkage to other sites provides and sustains further critical readings, as is primarily proposed by *Axis of Life*.

The manageability of the site is easy and simple; its potentiality lies in its "***re-structured***" structure which operates on several levels. On a diachronical level the site proposes an almost fictional traveling, a kind of virtual drowning in the signs of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. As a mental operated structure *Axis of Life* proposes for the viewer possible strange, fractal, chaotic and accidental immersions into history, memory and hope.

The Body

In such a context, it is possible to establish an important connection between the image and the power structures which form and surround it and to approach the image video or film etc. as part of a larger system of visual and representational communication. This approach is fundamentally concerned with the articulation of a representational politics. The politics of representation in terms of the video image is not something that is directly connected with everyday politics but it is connected in so far as the aesthetics of the image is always inscribed in a field of power. Power takes different forms and similarly a video image as a form of representation has therefore different connections with different types of power. It is very important, especially today when there is the tendency to talk about poetics, to talk in this respect, about the politics of representation of the video image.

While we have to think not only about the relation between media, images and politics in general, or about the situation of democracy in relation to media images, but also of

the internal politics of the image. In today's world, photographic, electronic and digital images are at the point of effective disintegration. Even with a very small PC we can manipulate every image. Photographic images especially are losing their credibility, for example, in the process of judging events in the world. Images, and especially photography, are at the point of questioning their internal reality effect. This is not simply a question of truth or falsity. Questions of plausibility and implausibility override those concerning whether an image is simply true or false. The problem, therefore, has no longer to do only with the mental images and consciousness, but with the paradoxical facticity of new media images, especially computer generated photographic images.

In December 1997 TV Tokyo suspended the weekly regularly broadcasting of the popular Pocket Monster cartoon, known as *Pokemon*, because nearly 700 people, mostly children, nationwide were taken to hospitals after watching the show on 16th of December 1997. TV viewers were afflicted by an outbreak of convulsions and faintness, ending with catalepsy. The scene from *Pokemon* which was suspected of sending hundreds to hospitals can be described as a four-second of flashing red, blue, white and black lights. It was a kind of strobe flash, like second sunlight, an extra brightness, something so bright that it resulted in both blindness and catalepsy amongst the TV viewers. The Japanese National Association of broadcasting industry immediately launched an investigation into the whole case.

Pocket Monster is one of the leading metaphors of Japanese pop culture, a culture which is addicted to cartoons. Through this example about *Pokemon* it is possible to discuss some other important points connected with the relationship between our physical body and the image. While I wish to avoid falling into the mass psychological hysterical readings of the always bad and dangerous influence of the TV upon generations of viewers, let us try to establish an almost heretical interpretation of the event. We could say that the TV epilepsy-like illnesses brought back to a mass of TV viewers the reality of their physical bodies. The human body has been for almost more than a century captured or frozen as images by photography. It has been approximately 120 years since 1877-80 when the psychiatrist Martin Charcot, at the Paris' Salpetriere hospital, took photographs of his hysterical patients with the purpose of making the illness visible (due to the underlying pathology of hysteria being invisible). Here, in the 1990s, the

Marina Grzinic and Aina Smid *The Woman who Continuously Talks* **(1994) video**

body fights back! With *Pokemon*'s hysterical suffering body we witness a reaction, a disobedience, to the until now immobile or frozen body's relation to the image. Hysteria was recognized as an illness only through photography making visible the woman's hysterical body. The success of photography in capturing hysteria had to do precisely with the mechanisms internal to photography, which are connected with its "reality effect" and with the photographic apparatus' potential to freeze the convulsive and hysterical body.

It seems that today in a world overfilled with images, to make the body visible and to remind ourselves that we have a physical body, the body had to fall back again into hysteria, into an outbreak of convulsions and fainting. On the other hand, *Pokemon* allows us to discuss the idea of total visibility constantly produced by the mass media. But this kind of total visibility is just media-processed, it is simply another form of misconstruction. In reality we have, as Peter Weibel once noted, zones of visibility and zones of invisibility. The *Pokemon* Cataleptic Tuesday event (*Pokemon* has been aired every Tuesday since April 1997) did not only bring us to the core of the processes of representation and to the so-

called zero point of representation in relation to the physical body, but it represents an almost psychotic appearance of these phenomena, by mass media, as constantly hidden zones of invisibility. These zones flashed for a moment so brightly on the surface of the image, they allowed the body to become blind and hysteric.

Merleau-Ponty, the French philosopher, developed an important theory that is today becoming more and more popular, that we actually look, see and act with the whole body. Not just with the eyes, but with the whole body. So now it is really a question of how to put the body back in the picture, and also how to be conscious of the physical body. This also raises questions of techniques of aesthetics which has relied on effects designed for the eye.

Interface Error

The mass of new technology today are designed to produce completely shiny, glossy images. VHS technology on the other hand might allow us to produce an almost wounded surface on the electronic image. To put the body back in the image, maybe we should look to the possibilities of scratches and random dirt effects and

not just to glossy and shiny surfaces. Maybe it is only possible to realise a physical body, the senses, the moment when our body stirs into action, through mistakes and errors in the image.

Mistakes in the image are like a fingerprint on the film, a scratch or scars on the skin, these are the evidence of existence of the image. To make a mistake is to find a place in time. A mistake is like a wound in the image, it is like an error in the body. This is a situation of producing a gap, a hiatus, where we can insert not only a proper body, but an interpretation. You can actually point with your finger and say 'Here, in this mistake, there is something beneath.' In the history of psychiatry, such a mistake is the symptom.

The whole of psychoanalysis is based on the theory of symptoms. The symptom is actually 'the thing', the subject who is speaking, and tells more than the subject itself, in our case the video image, could tell. We can actually think about the scratch, about the mistake, as a way of, in Jacques Derrida words, developing the logic of re-marking (re-marque). The logic of re-marking is similar to the function of the mistake or of the symptom, what at first seemed an informative, general view of an event, a shot, so to speak, from a neutral 'objective' distance, may be seen as subjective and suddenly turn out to be both threatening and embodied.

Marina Grzinic, born in Rijeka, Croatia, lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia, received her Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, on the topic of 'Virtual Reality and Changed Aspects of Time and Space'. She works as researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at the ZRC SAZU, the Scientific and Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Art in Ljubljana. She is currently living and working in Tokyo -1997/98 - for a year on a post-doctoral fellowship for the promotion of science and technology from the Japanese goverment. Grzinic is the author of three books; her most recent book — which addresses media, video art, art and post-socialism —was published in 1997 in Ljubljana. She has published extensively on issues of media, society, and visual art in international magazines and books. She also works as a freelance media theorist, art critic and curator. With **Aina Smid** (an art historian, currently working as an associate editor) Grzinic has worked collaboratively in the field of videoart and installation for 17 years.

Notes

1. In the beginning of 1997 the opposition forces and students protested in Belgrade because the party in power (lead by Slobodan Milosevic) refused to recognize the victory of the opposition forces in the city elections of Belgrade. First hand information of this was transmitted first via e-mails and than spread through the WWW, but without additional analysis and reflection(i.e. about what is really going on in Belgrade and who is all taking part in the protests). It seemed to be enough to lead some of the inhabitants of the WWW to proclaim that they were also taking part in the 'Serbian' revolution because they were obtaining first hand and eye witness information through the web.

Every day the Internet and the WWW seems to come closer to attaining the position of the prime media and ideological communication force of the 'so called' new world order named post-democracy. (Cf. 'Post-democracy, Politics and Philosophy', an interview with Jacques Ranciere, in: *Angelaki*, 1 : 3, London,1994.)

2 Cf. Nettime meeting in Ljubljana 'Beauty and the East' - 22 & 23 June 1997

3. *Axis of Life* by MARINA GRZINIC and AINA SMID is at http://www.ljudmila.org/quantum.east & http://lois.kud-fp.si/quantum.east SGI INDY/PC; PEARL/PHOTOSHOP, produced by Ljudmila (Ljubljana digital media lab) OSI/ Vuk Cosic/, Ljubljana 1996