

Failed utopia: The art of surveillance and simulating control: An interview with Toni Dimitrov

By Darko Aleksovski - 17/11/2011



Total Surveillance by Toni Dimitrov

tags

- anti-utopia
- community
- darko aleksovski
- digital
- installation
- macedonia
- media art
- participation
- simulation
- social
- toni dimitrov
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Darko Aleksovski interviews artist **Toni Dimitrov** about his work 'Total surveillance' featured in the group exhibition SEAFair '11 'Energy, Biopolitics, Resistance strategies and Cultural subversion'. Curated by Melentie Pandilovski, Elena Veljanovska, Zoran Petrovski, ending on the 20th November at the Skopje Museum of Contemporary Art, SEECAN (South East European Contemporary Art Network) and Kontejner, Zagreb. SEAFair 2011 contextualises the artistic and theoretical discourses developing around Bio-politics, aiming at re-evaluating its meaning today, as well as address the possibilities for resisting the dominant international discourses through emancipation and cultural subversion.

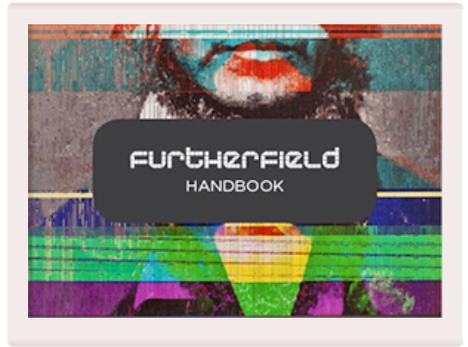
Darko Aleksovski: Inspiration is a term which has been differently interpreted throughout the history of art, but generally implies the genealogy of the idea. What was the main inspiration for a project like this? Can you tell us about your references (other similar projects, theory, philosophy, etc)?

Toni Dimitrov: Throughout the twentieth century, art changed its forms of representation. Representation through painting, making objects and visual contemplation, and prior to all - the mimesis - artists changed them with new ways of representation which more and more directly respond and represent the changes in the society, emphasising process, concept, action, interaction, new media, technology, surroundings and of course, the critical discourse... The thing that challenged, and still challenges me to express is the critical discourse and the resignation which is a result of the systematised life and the limitations of the system. It is that primordial anger which one feels at the moment of gaining awareness, when we actually realise where and how we live. Everything that is presented to us as a system that aims to ease our life, is not actually quite so. Take for instance, science and technology, and their goal to "work" for the benefit of humanity. It is not just that they do not seem to make life easier, but on the contrary their usage is harmful for humanity. Exactly from the moment when the greatest hopes were given to technology, science and the great theories, they seem to have failed to fulfill the expectations. Instead of being tools for achieving the ideals of humanity and attaining prosperity, they are becoming the most powerful tools of the system for establishing new forms of power and domination. That same indignation generated from this cognition is my greatest inspiration, from my first critical artwork, through to some other art project, different philosophical essays, and until now.

As inspiration from philosophy, primarily I can mention Baudrillard and Virilio, who precisely vivisection contemporary reality. Then my greatest interest for the utopians and anti-utopians from More and Campanella, who criticise the system at the moment by offering a solution, and all the way to Orwell, Zamyatin and, of course, Huxley, who gives the most precise image of the society we live in - benevolent totalitarianism. I also need to mention the Frankfurt School through From, Horkheimer,

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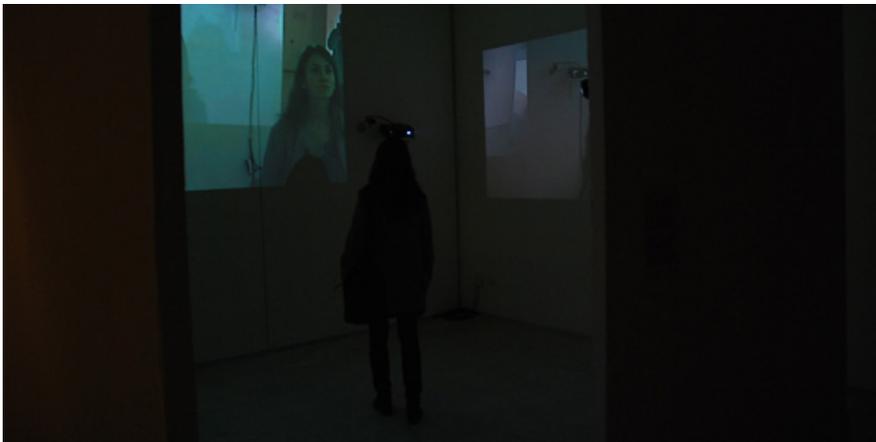


Darko Aleksovski: To which extent digital media is important for you as an artist? Do you regard the digital artworks to be carriers of more information in a present day digital surplus, or you think that art necessary expresses through digital media because it is the prevalent media in today's life? How much is the ready-made aspect of this project necessary?

Toni Dimitrov: Digital art affirms all these social changes and at the same time offers a departure from them, leaving different questions from different areas in the center of the discussion. Unambiguously, digital art develops wider contexts and penetrates in other different fields like philosophy, physics, linguistics, semiotics, politics, sociology, even biology. When you visit an exhibition like this, you no more have the feeling that you are at an exhibition where you should experience something beautiful, but you feel like being in a lab where something new is created, something unacceptable even for science itself. Ethic rules and scientific methods have no significance here. Some of those works went too far and by looking at them, you are likely to feel disgust or resignation, feelings that are important for expressing the critical dimension and gaining awareness.

Concerning the ready-made aspect of the digital art, we have to agree with Walter Benjamin, who considers that through making reproductions, the unique experience is replaced by many others and the replication contributes to the loss of the aura of the artwork, with the fact that the artwork through the process of distribution, is not so original, unrepeatable, unique, but can be reproduced and replicated. Simply, the uniqueness of the original is transformed in infiniteness or many others. That is one of the main critical perspectives addressed towards the art that originates after the mechanical reproduction and the development of arts such as film, photography, printmaking, and today we can include a wide variety of digital arts, where practically the original is not present. Here art loses its uniqueness, or aura to be more precise, but receives the "readiness" of the ready-made aspect.

Besides this critique with which I agree, I still think that art/music are created today to be seen/heard today, and not after ten years when they will be a part of the history. This means that art today is created with digital tools and digital media, equally as electronic music is created. In my opinion one should be current and to express through momentary assets, in order to express and present the new social and critical streams more precisely. On the other hand, this does not mean that we should not use classical media in a contemporary way and that I do not draw, or even make a mosaic, but still "officially" I use digital media and conceptual art to express myself and to address a critique.



Darko Aleksovski: Do you consider your project as a critique towards the social apparatus and the instrumentalised life, or towards the inert subject, instructed to accept ready-made social situations?

Toni Dimitrov: Of course the critique is directly addressed to the society and the system. Society is the one who possesses the monopoly of power and imposes these aspects of subtle, total control.



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However, the subject itself is not spared from the critique, precisely because of his inertness, because he does not react against this imposition, but unconditionally accepts it under the vague excuses that all of it is for "his own good", for his security, protection, etc. Still this imposition is generated by the system, through the upbringing, educating and modeling of the subject itself, so it is more than obvious who is to blame for this condition.

"Total surveillance" addresses the critique towards one of the most explicit "benefits" of contemporary society, which is so much present in our everyday life, that we do not even notice it. The project refers to the anti-utopian dimensions society gets in today's context. The exposure to constant surveillance is the subject of the anti-utopian works, which precisely anticipate the consequences of irregular use of technology, and the philosophical dimension of which totally corresponds with our present.

It is in these points that we see the postmodern analysis of institutions and discourses of modern art and the ways in which they normalise and discipline the subjects, analyses of the new communication technology, mass-media and their mechanisms of establishing power and domination... We see a critique directly addressed towards today's modern forms of power which establish new forms of domination. The critique towards information and communication technologies that contribute to the development of human capacities, decomposition of the centralised structure and concentration of power, democratisation of culture... as much as they contribute to the depersonalisation of individuals and manipulation of people.

The realisation of this progress is a vision of the anti-utopia made real, realisation for which time is becoming increasingly shorter. Today we see that, the anti-utopian predictions for the negative consequences of technological and social development are realised with surgeon's precision, in all of its wide variety, realised through social restrictions, concentration of power, social insecurity, depersonalisation of the individual, destroying of the emotions, control via mass media, mass production, instant entertainment... All these are described and anticipated by the smallest detail, in the works of the anti-utopians years before they became reality.



Darko Aleksovski: Do you see art as the most relevant way for critical actions?

Toni Dimitrov: No. Art is just one, maybe the most banal, but still most receptive way of critical action which will not leave many traces in reality. Art is a paradigm which represents things in a symbolic way. That does not mean that art is insignificant and that there are not examples of art and its critique generating a change or at least raising awareness of some issues, but still it is an accompanying method for addressing direct critique. Theory/ philosophy MUST be inevitable part of the art through which it gets the crucial point for a direct critique and eventually initiating changes. Art without theoretical basis is nearly empty art.



Darko Aleksovski: Your project is a vicious circle copy of the surveillance cameras. To which extent this artistic situation is a replica of the real one, or you consider the real situation to be even worse?

How much you think engaged and critical art are perceived nowadays, considering the dispersed art system?

Toni Dimitrov: Unfortunately too true a copy of reality. When you enter the exhibition room, you practically enter a real situation, i.e. you exit in the social reality. This is practically a copy of the social system which we live in. In that case there is no need for gradation of better or worse situation. Go out on the street, pass by the surveillance cameras and feel it. There were mixed reactions when visitors entered the exhibition room, most of them were real, expressed with unpleasant feeling and disgust when they realise they are uncoated and observed from every side. It is the very same thing that happens in every institution and outside on the streets, but we are unaware of who is observing us. That is the feeling I conveyed here; the feeling when you see the results of the observation. It is a precise reflection of the anti-utopian character of our society which develops in this direction mediated by technology.

On the other hand the technological revolution that happened in the last fifty years and the IT revolution created in the digital age, also created fundamental changes in society and the way it functions, even in the physical space. For Virilio, even reality is divided or more accurately it is substituted with another - a virtual one that becomes more powerful mediated by the new technologies. That is why the essay that goes along with the installation begins with a quote by Virilio: *One day the virtual world might overwhelm over the real world.* This is that same virtual reality in which monitors you look at your existence. It is Virilio that warned us that almost every critique toward the technology disappeared and that we unconsciously accept every innovation without critical view on its consequences, by which we slip in the dogmatism of totalitarian techno-culture. All of this is criticising the way technology changes the contemporary world and human himself, recognising a key factor in technology that determines the modern world.

Finally "Total surveillance" represents a kind of video installation or a network/structure composed of video cameras, video projectors and screens which mutually intersect and constantly record the object/viewer in front of them, from every angle. The viewer, with his/her presence is a participator and part of it at the same time. The cameras record his presence from all four sides, and the viewer is capable of watching the recordings on the screen in front of him i.e. to watch himself. It is about the total surveillance of the viewer, but one in which the viewer is under surveillance by himself from every side and perspectives which are usually invisible for him. In the surveillance, other viewers in the room are also included, by watching themselves, or by watching other viewers. With this, you get a network of crossed cameras and projectors which project images of the viewer from every side, fill the whole room and complement it with the visual noise of the space. This replication and reproduction creates a projection of the viewer in the screens, outside himself, in a sort of virtual world, which continues to infinity, similar to a mirror projected in another mirror, gaining new and new aesthetical forms, a product of the replication and reproduction of themselves.



More information about the project and the artist: [tonidimitrov \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:tonidimitrov[at]gmail.com)
All images by Ilija Madzarovski.

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