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Abstract

The paper addresses the connections between the avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde and new media art through a literary-historical and art-historical approach. It also discusses the technical media of film, video and new media. The authors compare the functioning of a computing machine, as theoretically conceived by Turing, with the creative processes of an avant-garde artist. The authors are particularly interested in the construction and integrity of personal identity in the infosphere, as explored by Luciano Floridi's philosophy and ethics of information. They then test theoretical insights regarding avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practices by interpreting the neo-avant-garde art projects of Nuša Dragan and Srečo Dragan from the late 1960s and 1970s and trace the continuity of concepts and processes in Srečo Dragan's new media practice in the 1990s up to the present day. Using the example of artists from Slovenia - a seemingly peripheral but powerful centre of development in both fields - the paper shows how the neo-avant-garde and new media are connected at the level of theory and in the artworks.

Keywords: new media art, neo-avant-garde, video, personal identity, Ana Nuša Dragan, Srečo Dragan

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A Constructionist Account of Identity in the Neo-Avant-Garde: The Informational and Personal Transformation of the Audience through the Projects of Nuša and Srečo Dragan

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The idea of the avant-garde is a widely studied phenomenon in today's art and cultural studies. The two approaches mentioned in this article foreground, first, the development of the avant-garde social structures in the arts through three phases, as presented in the synthetic overview by David Cottington: the emergence of avant-garde formations, their consolidation as international institutionalisation and the subsequent co-option of the avant-garde by the art market and, for example, the Cold War politics. The second approach construes the avant-garde movements in the continuum of cultural development based on a Hegelian and Heideggerian *Geistesgeschichte*-type approach by the Slovenian comparatist Janko Kos: the modernism of Kafka, Joyce, Woolf, etc., is distinguished from the avant-garde attempts to realise an autonomous and free subjectivity, as it was constitutive for the romantic era, in everyday life and its social structures. The subversive element of the avant-gardes turns out to be historically contextualised and challenged in both approaches.

The core of (neo-)avant-gardes is a critical engagement with the art institutions and the new electronic and computational communication media. For the new media theorist Lev Manovich, the avant-garde was embodied in computer media. The double bind between the art traditions and their communities and the technical and engineering domain prompts us to distinguish the formalism of Turing machines that merely transform material inscriptions in a total absence of any meaning from the intuitive notion of the algorithm (cf. Peter Weibel), the rules of which can be bent and, of course, reflected on. The quasi-scientific approach of Georges Seurat's pointillist

technique represents such a relationship to technology. Söke Dinkla's overview links avant-garde participatory projects with interactive (computer) art.

Video as a medium is a bridge between avant-garde audience participation and computer art. The core of a video is the viewer's reaction. A video is not window-like as in the perspective projection, nor a manipulated story in the diegetic space of a film; by including the visual appearance of the viewer-participant in a closed-circuit video installation, the video medium models the viewer. A video focuses on display as an object that participates in a group dialogue, evoking reactions from the participants that they also observe. For Vilém Flusser, video is a mirror of memory. The paper presents close-circuit videos and installations by Dan Graham and the first video in Yugoslavia, *White Milk of White Breasts* (1969) by Ana Nuša Dragan and Srečo Dragan. On the trajectory from avant-garde film, for example, by Dziga Vertov, to new media, video is often overlooked, which indicates the marginal position of video in relation to other mass media.

In the article, the section "Personality as Informational Integrity" rethinks the human in the information age. Artificial agents that nowadays embody artificial intelligence in its concrete, already-here, prosaic meaning as a resource of agency separated from understanding are considered a part of an all-encompassing infosphere in the philosophy of information of Luciano Floridi. In a video, the viewers are faced with and enter a dialogue with an engineered artefact. From such a perspective, a human being is made up of both physical integrity and personal data; a person is an information organism (this is how one is considered, e.g., in the GDPR). Interference with someone's data is an attack on them as an *infor*g since it transforms them, either by giving them access to too little data or too much, e.g., in the form of spamming or brainwashing. Human integrity can be understood as a multi-agent system that participates in higher-order multi-agent systems. The ethics of the infosphere and inforogs leads to the separation of constructionism, that is, the creative improvement of one's own integrity and care for the infosphere as an environment (keep in mind that this is not constructivism as in everything is a mere construct), from the focus on the agent and their actions. Egology – the creative construction of a personality separate from the environment – is replaced by ecology as work and processes in an all-encompassing infosphere. Of course, this does not mean that persons, inforogs (e.g., technological devices, community of agents, biological organisms, etc.) are not separate entities. It is important that the constructionist approach includes techniques of self-formation, as we know them from virtue ethics, such as upbringing, training, education, social and political practices and norms.

The "programming" of the conceptualists, as Nuša and Srečo Dragan call it, could be understood as an intrusion into the information packages that are the personal

identities of the participants in a happening. The happening *Different Things Are Exhibited on Titova Street* (1968) became the experimental film *RG*, which is itself a happening during the film projection. Simultaneously with the interaction in the closed-loop video installation and the construction of image archives, Nuša and Srečo Dragan explore the programming of participants' movement through space (*In Winter and Autumn 72h*, 1969; *Square Selection: 40 x 50 x 80 cm of Gravel under Glass*, 1969). In *The Thinking Visualization of an Object* (1972), visitors were asked to mark the direction in which an axonometrically drawn cube is facing. *The Direction of the Relationship of Sensibility and Imagination (FAVIT Experience, 1973)* was an algorithm for building a network of the social structure of the happening. In 1974, they held the happening *7 Nights and 1 Day of the Transmission of the People's Tradition in the Alpha Theta Rhythm*, in which artists such as Joseph Beuys, Achille Bonito Oliva, etc., also participated – the message was transmitted between the participants through repetition and creative change. The protocol of the project *2.0. Tactile Communication as Action and Interaction of the Exhibition Trigon* (1973) established the telepresence of the hand on the monitor.

Srečo Dragan integrates video into hypertext communication (digital animation *Arheus*, 1992/1993, as a three-channel video installation; online installation *Telepolis* based on the video *Rotas Axis Mundi*, 1995). In the project *Mobile E-Book Flaneur* (2010–2011), the participant is an inforg immersed in the infosphere of the city. In several projects Dragan uses the participants' responses to build the database: *Digital Sight* (1994), *Opus Canum* (1997), *Matrix Coincidence Dating Club* (2005, 2010, 2022), *Metaphorical Expansions* (2007), *Metaphorical Facsimiles* (2007), *Metamorphosis of Language* (2007), *Metonymy of Perception* (2007), *Paradigm of Image Sonification 1–3* (2014–2016), *Time Tunnel 2* (2024).

For example, the video installation titled *Metaphorical Facsimiles* (2007) demands more from the visitor-user than closed-loop videos. As in the case of impressionist paintings, where colours mix in the physiological mechanism of human vision, this time, the computer performs the colour mixing and displays a new colour; the viewer is then asked to name the colour resulting from the previous interaction. Therefore, the content of a new media video installation intervenes in the user's representational world in their verbalised experiences – something from their personality as a whole is taken into the work. At the same time, of course, the work initiates a process in the viewer that is similar to learning and whose purpose is their transformation. The audience is socialised through the artistic experience.