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New Media Art and the Zeitgeist

Pau Waelder

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“Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated.”

Wassily Kandinsky¹

In his book *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*, written in 1911, Wassily Kandinsky relates the spiritual, inner life of man to art and assigns to it a sense of slow but continuous progression: “The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience.”² Graphically, the spiritual life is represented as an acute-angled triangle that is “moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards,” progressively acquiring

and large-scale group exhibitions are usually presented as meeting points of the current trends in art. Still, in these events one form of contemporary art is usually underrepresented or even ignored. New media art, which uses digital tools and reflects on the effects of technology in our culture, is paradoxically disregarded in the discourses of mainstream contemporary art, which usually address the connections between artistic creation and the world we live in.⁵

This contradiction can be stressed by asserting that, if contemporary art is conceived of as reflecting the spirit of our time, new media art has literally addressed the *Zeitgeist* in the form of data flows that traverse our global information networks. If the cultural, social and political climate of our era can be portrayed, surely one of the most adept means nowadays is by extracting real-time informa-

tion from the Internet and giving it a form that can be perceived by a single viewer. A clear example of this can be found in Martin John Callanan’s artwork, *I Wanted to See All of the News From Today* (2007–),⁶ a net-based piece that collects the front pages of almost a thousand newspapers from all over the world and updates them continuously. The result is an overwhelming, contradictory image of the *Zeitgeist* as an overflow of information, a text so vast and detailed that it becomes unreadable. Interestingly, Callanan did not have to build a complex composition in order to create this portrait or to painstakingly update it; he just redirected the flow of data and displayed it in a grid. By doing this, he clearly states his proposition and leaves the artwork to become a never-ending process, always expressing “the presence of the present,” as Groys puts it, letting the world speak directly to the viewer.

Since 2007, Grégory Chatonsky has explored the concept of *Zeitgeist* mainly in a series of artworks, which, similar to Callanan’s, extract data from the Internet to generate ever-changing compositions or narratives. In these works, Chatonsky goes beyond the “spirit of the age” to suggest a “spirit of the flow” or *Flußgeist* that adeptly responds to our current reality, a time in which everything is subject to a continuous, fast-paced development. It is no longer possible to draw an all-encompassing portrait of our age, one can only present, as the artist states, “a temporary cut of the flow, a decoding if you prefer, of what the flow is at a particular moment.” This “cut” takes form in

his net-based artwork *Waiting* (2007),⁷ a mash up of data from several sources (tweets, Flickr images, sound and video) that generates an endless fiction about our lives on the Internet. As with Callanan’s work, Chatonsky’s *Waiting* collects data in real time and therefore is always set in the present.

The present, represented by the front pages of newspapers and the Twitter users’ posts in the above mentioned artworks, is ironically twisted in Antoine Schmitt’s *Time Slip* (2008).⁸ This net-based piece and installation consists of a news ticker that displays text culled from official news agencies and changes the verb tense from past or present to the future. This apparently simple modification implies a radically different reading of the news (for instance, “A plane crash in Madrid will kill 153 people”), as well as an unsettling perception of time. Again, it is by collecting

Pau Waelder

Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences *En_lloc* (Now_Here) and *Digital Culture* (Fundació Pilar i Joan Miro a Mallorca). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with several art magazines. He is New Media Editor at *ART.ES* magazine.

Notes

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*. [1911]. Translated by Michael T.H. Sadler. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

² Wassily Kandinsky, *op. cit.* I, 1.

³ Wassily Kandinsky, *op. cit.* I, 2.

⁴ Boris Groys. “Comrades of Time,” in *What is Contemporary Art?* Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010, 23.

⁵ As an example, Paolo Baratta, director of the Venice Biennale, defined this event in 2011 as “a grand pilgrimage where the voices of the world that speak to us of their and our future come together in the artists’ creations and the curators’ work.” Paolo Baratta, “A Statement,” *La Biennale – 54th Exhibition*. <<http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/archive/54th-exhibition/baratta/>>

⁶ Martin John Callanan, *I Wanted To See All of the News From Today*. <<http://greyisgood.eu/allnews/>>

⁷ Grégory Chatonsky, *Waiting*. <<http://gregory.incident.net/project/waiting/>>

⁸ Antoine Schmitt, *Time Slip*. <<http://www.gratin.org/timeslip/>>

NEW MEDIA ART

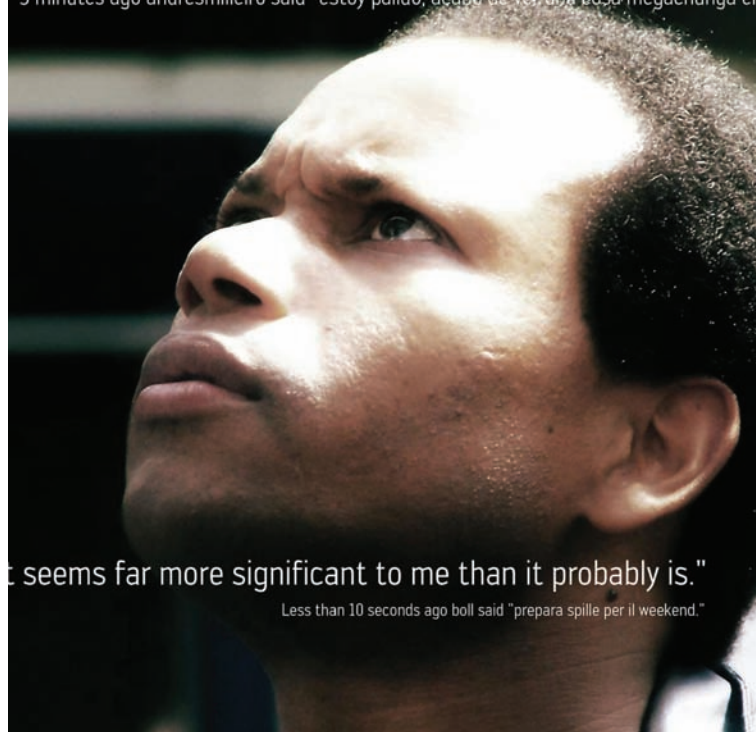
knowledge and experience, from the most enlightened individuals to the rest of humanity: “Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow; what today can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle is an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second segment.”³ This conception of art as a Promethean endeavour may seem anachronistic nowadays, but it does remind us of something that we still expect, to some degree, from a contemporary work of art: a reflection of the times we live in.

The *spiritual* in Kandinsky’s text can therefore be related to a wider concept of the spirit in connection to the present time: the *Zeitgeist*, or “spirit of the age.” Art can be seen as a reflection of the *Zeitgeist* in the sense that it draws elements from its socio-political, cultural and intellectual climate and generates a response in a form that is not simply descriptive but metaphorical: it does not just provide information but promotes thought. According to historian Boris Groys, art even defines its contemporaneity in the extent to which it succeeds in portraying the spirit of its age: “art seems to be truly contemporary if it is authentic, if for instance, it captures and expresses the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions or strategies aiming at success in the future.”⁴ Contemporary art thus becomes a link between the viewer and the *Zeitgeist*: free of the past, its liveliness is expressed in its direct relation to the present. Major events in the art world, such as biennales, international art fairs

tion from the Internet and giving it a form that can be perceived by a single viewer. A clear example of this can be found in Martin John Callanan’s artwork, *I Wanted to See All of the News From Today* (2007–),⁶ a net-based piece that collects the front pages of almost a thousand newspapers from all over the world and updates them continuously. The result is an overwhelming, contradictory image of the *Zeitgeist* as an overflow of information, a text so vast and detailed that it becomes unreadable. Interestingly, Callanan did not have to build a complex composition in order to create this portrait or to painstakingly update it; he just redirected the flow of data and displayed it in a grid. By doing this, he clearly states his proposition and leaves the artwork to become a never-ending process, always expressing “the presence of the present,” as Groys puts it, letting the world speak directly to the viewer.

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Grégory Chatonsky, *Waiting*, 2007. Screenshot.



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Antoine Schmitt, *Time Slip*, 2008.



