

V kontekstu likovne umetnosti bi lahko s formalnega vidika rekli o delu *Time Slip* (Časovni zdrs, 2008), da privzema podoben material kot konceptualna umetnica Jenny Holzer, ki ravno tako v številnih delih uporablja LED-zaslone, na katerih se izpisuje besedilo. A med njenimi projekcijami in delom Antoina Schmitta obstaja temeljna razlika v načinu proizvajanja pomenov. Oba umetnika črpata zagon za delo iz opazovanja družbene in politične situacije in kritike množičnih medijev; oba proizvajata na videz protislovne izjave, s katerimi predlagata alternativen pogled na svet. Kljub temu izhajata iz dveh zelo različnih pogledov na umetnost. Če si prisvojimo nekoliko humorno razlikovanje Leva Manovicha, ki vidi bistveno razliko med tako imenovano Duchampovo deželo, ki je zasidrana v ready-madeu, in Turingovo deželo, ki jo podpira aktivni algoritemski sistem, bi lahko razumeli, da se ukvarjamo z zelo različnimi kulturnima vmesnikoma. Se vedno s kančkom humorja se spomnimo umetnikove minimalistične podobe enega bita na črnem ozadju, ki ga je naslovil *Memorial za prvi bit* (2001), kot posvetilo za začetek mišljenja v Turingovi deželi. Antoine Schmitt pogosto poudarja, da obstaja radikalna razlika med algoritemsko/računalniško/programsko umetnostjo, ki privzema specifičen formalni jezik, ki proizvaja popolnoma »nov«¹ kulturo gledanja in razumevanja sveta, v katerem živimo. Umetnik programer ne ustvarja, temveč predvideva potencialno obliko umetniškega dela, ki je aktivno, polavtomatično in podvrženo motnjam in napakam.

Vendar pa moramo razumeti, da nova vladavina tehnologije ni popolnoma brez protislovij. S pojavom stalno »novih«² medijev se ukvarjajo v kritični teoriji v zvezi z razumevanjem zgodovine kot nadaljevanja namesto nenehne diskontinuitete kulture, ki nas omejuje tako, da vidimo zgolj do tja, kjer se je pojavila zadnja nova stvar. S problemom te kritike se uspešno ukvarja delo *Time Slip*, ker je njegova temeljna funkcija zasnova dvoumnega odnosa med zdaj, preteklostjo in potencialom. Besedilo v delu *Time Slip* prikazuje stalen pretok »novih novic«. Računalniški program izpisuje uradne spletne novice, ki jih objavljajo tiskovne agencije, le da jih prevaja iz slovničnega preteklika v prihodnjik in nas s tem absurdno vrača v stalno ponavljanje sedanjika. Toda ko Antoine Schmitt govori o »novem«, se ne ozira toliko na zgodovino in vlogo spomina kot na fenomenološki radikalizem računalnikov, ki nam omogočajo matematično in algoritemsko mišljenje, ki ne bi bilo mogoče brez »novih«³ medijev, torej brez računalnika. Upošteva jezik »simetrije, transformacije, matematičnih funkcij, neskončnih vzorcev, permutacij, interpolacij in ekstrapolacij, mrežnega računa in naključnih števil«⁴, ki je do neke mere proizvod kulture, vendar ga lahko razumemo tudi kot polavtomatičen sistem, ki nam omogoča gledanje kulture kot sintetičnega procesa. Ni pomembno le, kaj mehanizem dela, temveč tudi, kako dela. V tem smislu je računalniško generirana umetnost namnjena k demistifikaciji operacij programske opreme, kar pogosto pripelje umetnike do aktivne

podpore odprtokodnih idej. Algoritme najprej avtorizirajo, potem pa jih napravijo dostopne za uporabo in manipulacijo.

»Nivo, do katerega umetniki razumejo in nadzirajo tehnologije, je stalno prisotna tema pri obravnavi tehnološke in znanstvene umetnosti. [...] Bolj ko umetnik ali umetnica to razume, več moči ima pri raziskovanju in prilagajanju tehnologije za umetnost in bolj prispeva h kulturnemu diskurzu o teh tehnologijah.«⁵ Dokaj pomembno je, da Schmitt nima umetniškega ozadja, temveč je predvsem inženir in programer, ki se je odločil, da bo svoje ideje izrazil v obliki umetnosti na zelo specifični točki v času, ko je svetovni splet postal javen. Idejo o logičnih sekvencah, ki so vgrajene v stroje, je prepoznal kot intelektualno navdušujočo ne zgolj s tehničnega vidika, temveč tudi s kulturnega in morda celo poetičnega; računalnik je začel uporabljati za proizvajanje zvočno-vizualnih zaslonov. Od sredine devetdesetih živi, kot sam pravi, paralelni življenji; po eni strani kot zelo specializiran samostojni programer in po drugi strani kot umetnik. Včasih se ti življenji prekrizata, kot na primer pri oblikovanju obnašanja občutljivih objektov pri podjetju Violet, kjer je zasnoval tako imenovano igračo Nabaztag. Kasneje jo je uporabil v kompleksnem delu *Nabaz'mob, opera za 100 malih zajcev* (2006), ki jo je komponiral v sodelovanju z Jean-Jacquesom Birgéjem. Zajce sta nastavila tako, da so proizvajali zvok z minimalnim časovnim zamikom in ponavljanjem, tako da je spominjal

na nekatere eksperimente Cagea, Nancarrowa in Ligetija. Glasbeni in koreografski zapis sta sestavila v treh dejanjih in ga predvajala po brezžičnem omrežju.

Pri delu *Time Slip* pride do izraza še ena prevladujoča lastnost v delih Antoina Schmitta – odnos med vzrokom, posledico, naključjem in svobodno voljo. Delo je vizualna manifestacija dinamičnih postopkov obdelave podatkov, vgrajenih v današnjo kulturo. Raziskuje, kako je naša družba zakodirana, da bi preprečila spremembe in uspešno omamila državljane z neizbežnostjo katastrofičnih dogodkov, o katerih poročajo množični mediji. Poročila obveščajo publiko o minulih dogodkih, ki sami po sebi spodbujajo pasivnost prejemnika, ker se tu ne da narediti nič več, ker je vsakršno upanje zaman. Z manipulacijo oziroma hekanjem novic, ki obveščajo publiko o tem, kar se bo zgodilo v prihodnosti, umetnik naelektri udobno otopelo publiko, da bi postala odgovorni udeleženec pri svetovnih dogodkih. *Time Slip* prelomi determinizem informacij, ki se kopičijo po količini, in ne kvaliteti, da bi omogočil vpogled v nevidne procese, od koder prihajajo. Delo proizvaja nelagodje, kar prejemniku ponuja možnost, da bi spremenil prihodnost, vendar frustracije s tem ne preraste. Ravno nasprotno, še bolj poudari zavest o nezmožnosti, da bi kakorkoli ukrepali, in povzroči, da se neudobje spremeni v pravo tesnobo. Opazovalcu dejansko predstavi pomanjkanje vsakršne izbire, ker bo sistem še naprej proizvajal novice ne glede na

namere političnih subjektov. Umetnik dvoumno uporablja formalno logiko programa, da bi razkril determinizem in pomanjkanje svobodne volje v družbi. V tem smislu lahko vidimo avtomatizem samega računalniškega programa kot metaforo za samovoljni diktat množičnih medijev, ki so v službi proizvajanja podrejenih in pasivnih državljanov. Množični mediji so kot algoritmi, njihova funkcija je vzdrževanje operativnosti sistema, ne da bi nas o čemerkoli dejansko obveščali.

Politična agenda je v delih Antoina Schmitta sicer pogosto precej skrita. Morda je najbolj neposredno politično delo njegov izmišljeni lik z imenom *puppetpresident* (2004), ki ga je zasnoval na podlagi ready-made chatterbot brskalnika po imenu A.L.I.C.E. Poganjajo ga standardne zakonitosti spletnih klepetalnic, ki jih je napisal dr. Wallace in jih distribuirajo na spletni strani pandorabots, ki jih je umetnik prilagodil posebej za to delo. Interaktivni pogovor s *puppetpresidentom* je zavajajoče oseben in živ. Čeprav se popolnoma dobro zavedamo, da se sporazumevamo s strojem, se ne morem načuditi njegovi genialni naravi, ki tako natančno spominja na naše lastne misli. Spominja na prejšnje delo, vendar v nasprotnem smislu. Če smo pri *Time Slip-u* prepoznali metaforo za avtomatizirano družbo, potem pri *puppetpresidentu* govorimo o metafori za organsko digitalno življenje. Pri obeh delih se srečamo z vprašanjem o naši percepciji tega, kaj je resnično. Najbolj intrigantna lastnost virtualnega lika ni njegova zmožnost, da bi uporabnika

klepetalnice popeljal v umetni svet, temveč sposobnost, da ga pripelje do meje, ki loči realno od virtualnega. Urbana legenda pravi, da je Einstein razglasil računalnik za neverjetno hitrega, točnega in neumnega, človeka pa za neverjetno počasnega, nenatančnega in genialnega, ter da lahko skupaj delata nepredstavljive stvari. Ne glede na to, komu pripada ta citat, lahko z gotovostjo rečemo, da je eden od najbolj fascinantnih vidikov življenja danes v stvareh, ki niso omejene na realnost niti niso pritrjene v domišljijjskih svetovih. V obeh delih avtor uporablja generator teksta, ki simulira lingvistične strukture govornega, torej naravnega jezika. Schmitt pripravi s svojimi deli publiko do spoznanja, da je subjektivnost del računalniško generiranih informacij in da ne moremo več razlikovati med virtualnim in realnim. Ukvarja se s tako imenovano razširjeno realnostjo, ki pogosto privzema zelo poetično in estetsko obliko. V zbirki vizualnih instalacij z naslovom *Still Living* (2007) še vedno naslavlja politične teme, a sporočilo podaja v visoko estetski in minimalistični obliki. V tem delu je umetnik programiral serijo vizualizacij za statistične podatke, kakor da so igri organizmi, katerih ekosistem je odvisen od računalniškega okolja. Na splošno ravna s programi in njihovimi vizualizacijami kot z bitji z lastnim obstojem, ki ga definira »subtilni odnos med motivacijo ter oblikami in silami naključja, organizmov in vesolja«. V estetskem smislu njegova dela določajo strogo minimalni vizualni učinki, ki nam ponujajo možnost, da jih opazujemo kot poetične kode.

Kodo predstavlja z različnimi minimalističnimi osnovnimi geometričnimi grafičnimi oblikami (pika, črta, ploskev), ki so skoraj popolnoma oguljene vseh drugih pomenov in se najpogosteje odzivajo na okolje. Postavlja jih na spleto, v galeriji ali na prostem. Pokrivajo lahko vsakršno površino, celo celotno arhitekturno zgradbo kot pri delu *Mesto z nočno lučko* (2010), kjer je umetnik transformiral stavbo v veliko nočno lučko za mesto, ki je podobna spalni lučki na računalniku. Kot bi napravil lastno monumentalno interpretacijo citata iz Williama Gibsona: »Nebo nad pristaniščem je bilo barve televizorja, nastavljenega na mrtev kanal.«⁶ V istem času je Schmitt zasnoval številne in situ instalacije, ki temeljijo na videomapisanju arhitekturnih interjerjev in zunanjsčine. S tem je razprl področje tako imenovane mehke arhitekture, ki še bolj izziva našo percepcijo trdne snovi, fizične realnosti in oddajanja svetlobe. Ena od tovrstnih prostorskih intervencij je bila tudi *Pixel Noir* (2010), ki je zasidrana v formalnem vprašanju likovne umetnosti, torej Maljevičeva obravnava naše percepcije slike. Vprašanje lahko vidimo v popolnoma novi luči, če imamo v mislih na primer *Memorial za prvi bit*. Delo je vizualna generativna instalacija, ki jo sestavljajo črna kvadratna slika, računalnik, videoprojektor in poseben program, ki dopušča svetlečim pikslom, da se zbirajo zgolj okoli roba slike, a nikoli ne vstopijo v črn kvadrat.

Schmitt se ukvarja s širokim naborom tem, a v njegovi oguljeni, minimalni estetiki lahko

prepoznamo njegov prvotni interes, ki je v raziskovanju estetike računalnikov in ekspresivnih vidikov vmesnikov, ki prinašajo velik potencial za polavtomatične sisteme, alternativne načine interakcije, generativne grafične in subtilne odnose med računalniki in človeškimi bitji.

Izdaja ob razstavi / Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Antoine Schmitt
Time Slip
www.aksioma.org/time_slip

Aksioma | Projektni prostor / **Project Space**
Komenskega 18, Ljubljana, Slovenia
12. - 28. oktober 2011 / **October 12 - 28, 2011**



Produkcija / Production: Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, 2011
www.aksioma.org

Izvršna producentka / Executive producer: Marcela Okretič
Umetniški vodja / Artistic Director: Janez Janša
Stiki z javnostjo / Public Relations: Mojca Zupanič
Tehnična podpora / Technical support: Valter Udovičič
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Projekt so podprli Institut français - Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes / Francoski inštitut - Ministrstvo za zunanje in evropske zadeve, Ministrstvo za kulturo RS in Mestna občina Ljubljana / **Supported by Institut français - Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia and the Municipality of Ljubljana.**

Sponzor / Sponsor: Datacenter d.o.o.



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Ida Hirsénfelder

The new, the old and the media of the future

Formally speaking, in the context of visual art practice, *Time Slip* (2008) as a text running on a LED display adopts similar material to the one conceptual artist Jenny Holzer uses in many of her works. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two, and it resides in the way the meaning is produced. The impetus of both pieces derives from a socio-political observation and a critique of mass media; they both produce seemingly contradictory statements that suggest an alternative view of the world. Nevertheless, they come from very different standing points. If we were to adopt Lev Manovich's somewhat humorous division between the two as the difference between a Duchamp-land, anchored in the ready-made, and a Turing-land, supported by an active algorithmic system, then we would understand that we are dealing with two very different cultural interfaces. Humorously still, the artist made a minimalist image of one bit on black background entitled *Memorial for The First Bit* (2001) dedicating it to the beginning of the Turing-land way of thinking. Antoine Schmitt often emphasises that the radical difference of algorithmic/computer/programme art is the adaptation of a specific formal language that produces an entirely "new" culture of seeing and understanding of the world we are living in. The artist/programmer does not create but rather predicts the potential shape of the piece that is active, semi-automatic and is subject to the production of glitches.

However, the new reign of technology is not without contradictions. The constant "newness" of the media has been addressed in critical theory with regard to understanding history as a continuation rather than a constant discontinuity of culture, which would restrict us to see only as far as the last new thing. This critique is successfully dealt with in *Time Slip*, because its basic function is to construct an ambiguous relation between the now, the past and the potential. The text in *Time Slip* displays a continuous stream of "new news". Computer software transcribes official online newscasts by the news agencies from the grammatical past tense to the future tense, absurdly repeating the constant now. But when Antoine Schmitt speaks about the "new", it is not so much in regard to history or memory, but in regard to the phenomenological radicalism of computers, which provide us with mathematical and algorithmic cognition, which would not be possible without the "new" media, i.e. the computer. We are talking about the language of "symmetrisation, transformations, mathematical functions, *moiré* pattern, permutations, interpolation and extrapolation, matrix calculus, and random numbers",¹ which is to some extent a product of culture, but it can also be seen as a semi-autonomous system that enables us to view culture as a synthetic process. It is not only important what the machine does, but also *how* it does it. In this sense, computer-generated art has a tendency to demystify the operation of software, leading the artists to support open-source ideas by authoring algorithms and making them available for further use and manipulation. "*The extent to which artists understand and can control technologies is a perennial issue in technological and scientific art. [...] The more an artist understands, the more power he or she has to explore and adapt the technology for art and to contribute to the cultural discourse about those technologies.*"² It is somewhat relevant that Schmitt does not have an artistic background; he is above all an engineer and a programmer who has decided to express his ideas in the form of art at a very specific point in time, that is, when the web was made public. He found the idea of a logical sequence embedded in a machine intellectually intriguing, not just from a technical but also from a cultural and perhaps poetic point of view, and therefore started to instruct the computer to generate audio-visual displays. Since the mid-nineties he has lived, as he says, parallel lives – as a highly specialised freelance programmer and as an artist. Sometimes the two come together, e.g. when designing the behaviour of sensitive objects for the company Violet programming the Nabaztag toy. Later he used it in a complex piece *Nabaz'mob, opera for 100 smart rabbits* (2006), composed in collaboration with Jean-Jacques Birgé. The rabbits were set to produce sound with a minimal time delay and repetition in order to produce a sound reminiscent of some of the experiments of Cage, Nancarrow or Ligeti. The

musical and choreographic score was composed in three movements, and transmitted via wi-fi. subjects. Ambiguously, the artist uses the formal logic of the programme to unveil the determinism and the lack of free will in society. In this sense, the automatism of the programme itself can be seen as a metaphor for the arbitrary dictation of mass media in the service of producing submissive and passive citizens. Mass media are like an algorithm; they only function to make the system operate, not to inform.

The political agenda is otherwise often quite hidden in other works by Antoine Schmitt. Perhaps most directly political is the programmed fictional character named *puppetpresident* (2004), which was created using a ready-made chatterbot engine called A.L.I.C.E., driven by the standard chat rules written by Dr Wallace and distributed on the pandorabots web site, which the artist had further customized. The interactive chat with the *puppetpresident* is delusively personal and live; although we are fully aware that we are communicating with a machine, we cannot help but marvel at its ingenious nature that resembles our own thread of thoughts so accurately. This is like the previous work, only in the reverse order. If we observed *Time Slip* as a metaphor for automated society, than *puppetpresident* is a metaphor for organic digital life. In both pieces, our perception of what is real comes into question. The intriguing quality of this virtual character, for example, is not its capacity to transport the user of the chat into an artificial world, but rather in

its ability to bring one to the boundary between the real and the virtual. An urban myth has it that Einstein proclaimed computers incredibly fast, accurate and stupid, humans incredibly slow, inaccurate and brilliant, and together they could do unimaginable things. Whoever the quote belongs to, it is most certain that the most fascinating aspect of life today resides in things that are not limited to the real, and neither are they fixed within imaginary worlds. In both pieces the artist uses text generators to simulate the linguistic structure of the spoken, that is, natural language. Through his work, Schmitt makes the audience aware that subjectivity is part of computer-generated information and that nowadays one cannot divide the virtual from the real. He deals with the so-called enhanced reality that often takes on a poetic and highly aesthetic form. In a collection of visual installations entitled *Still Living* (2007), he still refers to the political, but the message is already conveyed in a highly aesthetic and minimalist manner. The artist programmed a series of visualisations for statistical data as though it would be a playful organism, depending on the ecosystem of the computed environment. He generally treats his programmes and their visualisations like creatures, with their own presence, which is defined by "a subtle relationship between the motivation and the shapes and forces of the randomness, of the body and of the universe." Aesthetically, his works are defined by strictly minimal visual effects

that give way to the possibility of observing the entire poetics of the code. He represents the code by various minimalistic geometrical graphical representations, which are almost rudimentary (dot, line, surface) and which most often react to the environment. They can exist online, in a gallery or in open-air spaces, and they can cover any surface up to the whole architecture as in the piece *City Sleep Light* (2010), where the artist had transformed a whole building into the sleep light of the city, similar to the sleep light of a computer. It seems as though he has created his own interpretation of the William Gibson quote: "The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel." At the same time, Schmitt devised several site-specific installations, based on video mapping of the architectural interior and exterior, making way for the so-called soft architecture, which further challenges our perception of solid matter, physical reality and light emission. One of these space interventions was *Pixel Noir* (2010), which is anchored in formal questions of fine arts i.e. Malevich's consideration of how we perceive a painting. This can be seen in a whole new perspective if we bear in mind the *Memorial for The First Bit*. The work is a visually generative installation, constructed from a black square painting, a computer, a video-projector and a specific programme that allows luminous pixels to flock around the frame of the picture, never to enter the black square.

Schmitt addresses a vast variety of themes, but in his stripped, minimal aesthetic it is possible to see that his primary interest lies in exploring the aesthetics of computation and the expressive aspects of interfaces that provide great potentials for semi-autonomous systems, alternative modes of interactions, generative graphics and subtle relationships between computers and human beings.

ANTOINE SCHMITT

TIME SLIP

- 1 Stephen Wilson, *Information Arts – Intersections of Art, Science and Technology*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002, p. 313.
- 2 Ibid., p. 317.

http://www.aksioma.org/time_slip

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