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Actual Virtuality: the Arts

Virtuality and Reality

As we know, all what is *real* is actually the case. In contrast to the real, the *virtual* could be the case, has all the virtues to do so, but just actually isn't.

Looking at the virtual from that etymological perspective, it is not enough to involve computers to call something virtual, e. g. things like virtual classrooms, virtual libraries or the quite recent texan »Virtual Border Watch Program«¹, where watchers of webcams placed along the border could report illegal immigration.



All this is not in the blessed state of mere possibility but *online in the internet*. What is online or just computerized looks and feels strange and weird in the beginning, somehow unreal, so people eventually call

¹ <http://www.americanpatrol.com/05-FEATURES/050919-BDR-CAM-COMING/BCFull.html>

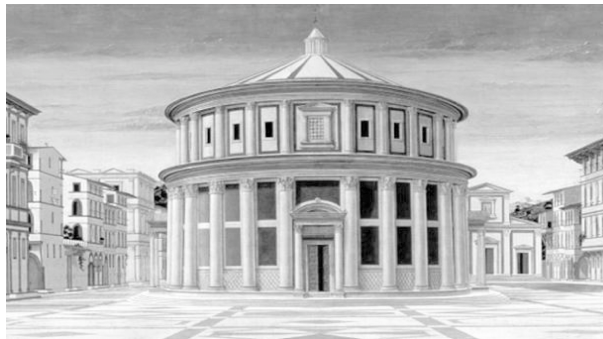
it virtual. But as a matter of fact, all that is computerized gained such an amount of reality that nothing could be more mistaken than to call the products of the information technology industry »virtual«.

Following Niklas Luhman's notion of the term »meaning«² (»Sinn« in german language), acting meaningful means to ponder the possibilities and to choose the one that »makes sense«, that provides for further choices instead of entering dead ends. The other choices remain virtual, those that could have been chosen, but weren't. Some systems are able to act within this medium of meaning, such as consciousness and communication. Picking fruitful options, they leave the virtual ones aside. Some others, like, e. g. computers, seem not to be able to do so. Thus computers have a very intimate relationship to the virtual.

The Arts and the Virtual

If the arts just showed what actually is the case, then there wouldn't be any need for them. The arts show what is invisible, what remained virtual beforehand.

Doing this by use of illusionism, by use of formal geometrical



methods as the central perspective, works of art show rooms and buildings that never have been built, but could have. So did, amongst many others, Piero della Francesca with his works, e. g. with his ideal city, la città ideale.

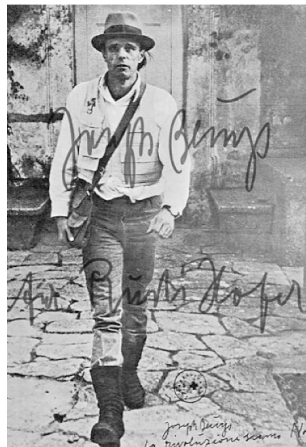
² see, e. g. Niklas Luhmann: Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft I. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997. p. 44 ff.

In a very different sense, as fulfiller of wishes the dream³ is some-



thing very virtual and so by necessity became an artistic topic, e. g. Henri Rousseau painted *The Dream* in 1910, working in the realm of the subconscious.

But what could or what should or what to the better should not be



is not only a formal or an individual category. Society itself could, should or shouldn't be as it is. Utopia is a virtual place, and Joseph

3 Sigmund Freud: Die Traumdeutung. Wien 1900.

Beuys' still unfulfilled claim that everybody should be an artist became a piece of art, called social sculpture («Soziale Plastik»)⁴.

Obviously, art is actual virtuality, and by this very paradox keeps going strong to move the distinction between art and non-art, between the virtual and the real.

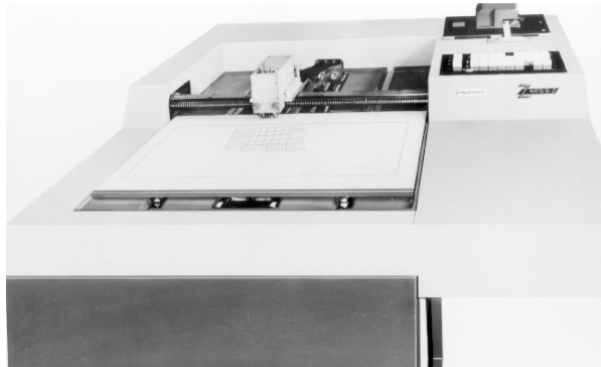
The Computer and the Arts

Computability is different from reality. So real computers could be media for the virtual. Along this paradox of the real machine that does symbolic computation in the virtual, society changes, and the virtual sometimes becomes real.

Hence it should be no surprise to find that computers have been media for artistic endeavour since this was possible for the first time.

I.

In the mode of the *synthetic selfcontained operation of the Turing Machine*, computability served as a medium to mix rule and random-



ness. Markoff processes were able to produce any number of original musical compositions. Computer programs executing algorithms with artificial randomness produced one masterpiece after the other, showing that there are always infinitely more original drawings still and

⁴ http://www.dhm.de/lemo/objekte/pict/BiographieBeuysJoseph_photoBeuys/

forever resting in the virtual than are producible with the actual machines, like the Zuse Graphomat Z64⁵ in the real.

A tiny glimpse at what actually has been done out of the sheer infi-



Frieder Nake, Hommage a Hartung, 1965

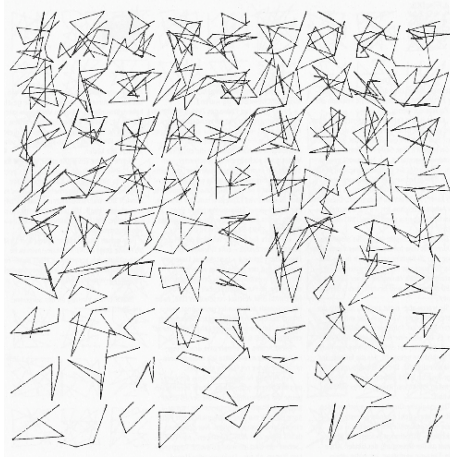


F. Nake, Zufälliger Polygonzug 1964

nity of all the virtual drawings possible shows some stylistic confor-

5 http://irb.cs.tu-berlin.de/~zuse/Konrad_Zuse/de/Rechner_Z64.html

mity, which is the style of the totally formal recursive selfcontained computed virtuality⁶:



Vera Molnar, Disparition, 1989

2.

When it became possible by invention of the graphical user interfaces



and special periphery, users could interrupt and start what from then on

⁶ all from Frieder Nake and Diethelm Stoller: Algorithmus und Kunst. Die präzisen Vergnügen. Hamburg: Sauter und Lackmann 1993. Catalogue.

is called interactivity. In a *mimetic cybernetic feedback loop* people could test how virtuality feels like.

One could investigate how it feels to control music by movement of the body alone, as in David Rokeby's *Very Nervous System* from 1982⁷.



Or what, if the city was built from letters, as in Jeffrey Shaw's *Legible City*⁸ from 1989.

7 <http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/vns.htm>

Or we as visitors of an art gallery could find out how it feels one



moment before being shot by an automatically targeting snipercam at a border like the one in Texas, since Paul Garrin and David Rokeby did *Border Control*⁹ in 1994.

How would it be, if the virtual became reality?

Virtual Reality tells us. It gives an answer within the world of individual experiences and sensations, thus leaving the constraints of the Turing Machine behind.

3.

But the computer is much more than personal nowadays. It shapes society by enabling *emergent social communicative* phenomena. Consequently, new topics have been adopted by artists: economy, politics, communication.

An emblematic artistic project, called »Vote Auction«¹⁰, that has the slogan to »bring capitalism and democracy closer together«, was invented by the american student James Baumgartner and carried on by the austrian »business-artist« Hans Bernhard, who also was one of the E-Toy team. It won an award at the Prix Ars Electronica 2005 in Linz, Austria.

8 http://www.jeffrey-shaw.net/html_main/show_work.php

9 <http://pg.mediafilter.org/bp/bpny.html>

10 <http://www.vote-auction.net/>

At the website of the project, we can read the following:

[V]ote-auction.com is devoted to combining the American principles of democracy and capitalism by bringing the big money of campaigns directly to the voting public. We provide a forum for campaign contributors and voters to come together for free-market exchange. ... [V]ote-auction.com has created a new paradigm in the election industry. Now the voters can take control of their voting capital and campaign investors will see a greater return on their investment. Control your vote - control your democracy!¹¹



The idea is a hoax of an eBay-like bidding system for votes within the electoral presidential campaign 2000.

Voteauction was a Website which offered US citizens to sell their presidential vote to the highest bidder during the Presidential Elections 2000, Al Gore vs. G. W. Bush.¹²

The uproar in the media was gigantic. Vote Auction made it into CNN¹³ and other highly visible places in american TV. The site was shut down, moved to another provider and re-appeared again.

Here, the virtual is only a very small step besides reality, in which similar but more clandestine structures have already evolved. Art with computers has arrived at society. And the virtuality worked out here is more of a realistic menace than an impossible quirk of some computer nerd as it used to be in the past. The virtual is actually what we have to

11 <http://vote-auction.net/index00.htm>

12 <http://vote-auction.net/>

13 http://www.vote-auction.net/movies/CNN_Burdenofproof_160x120.html

expect in the near future: art could be regarded as actual virtuality of



the society. A close look at recent artistic practice should reveal what is not the case, but could be, maybe, sooner or later.

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