

Re-discovering past potential futures and the politics of hope

Statement by Inke Arns (Berlin) for the panel discussion “Re-Inventing Radio”, Ars Electronica 2004, September 6, 2004

The book manuscript I finished recently (which is actually my PhD thesis) is entitled *Objects in the Mirror may be Closer Than They Appear: The Avant-garde in the Rear-View Mirror*.¹ It researches a paradigmatic shift in the way artists reflect the historical avant-garde and the notion of utopia in visual and media art projects in the 1980s and 1990s in (ex-)Yugoslavia and Russia. The title obviously relates in a very interesting - perhaps uncanny - way to this year’s ars electronica concept which opens with what the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright said back in the 1930s: “I’ll throw the damned rearview mirror out of the damned window because I don’t want to know where I’ve come from, but where I’m going.” Wright is said to have indeed broken off the car’s rearview mirror and thrown it out of the window.



Aleksandr Rodchenko, Self-portrait in Rear-View Mirror, 1933

What we see *here* is a photograph taken by the Soviet photographer Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1933 (thus taken around the time of Wright’s quotation), showing the photographer himself reflected in a rear view mirror of a car. This image, which for the avant-garde is an impossible image because *the avant-garde did not want ever to know where it was coming from but only where it was going* (although this too easy

¹ Arns, Inke: *Objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear! Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel. Zum Paradigmenwechsel der künstlerischen Avantgarderezeption in (Ex-)Jugoslawien und Russland von den 1980er Jahren bis in die Gegenwart* (Phil.-Diss. Humboldt-University Berlin 2004), Revolver: Frankfurt/Main 2005 (German version), Maska: Ljubljana 2005 (Slovenian translation); resumé at http://www.v2.nl/~arns/Texts/Zusammenfassung_der_Dissertationsschrift_Arns_2004.html

an assumption should/could be also questioned), represents at the same time in a very condensed form what I have been interested in in my research and what I am going to talk about briefly today (15 min.).

In the past ten or so years in digital and media art projects there has been a growing interest in what is reflected by this rear-view mirror. That's what this photograph literally embodies. However, it is not simply *past futures* artists have been interested in, i.e. those ideas that over the course of history turned into actualities or were realized and thus retroactively can be identified as driving forces of technological development. Such a pragmatic view is advocated by the concept of this year's ars electronica. Most of the artists I was dealing with in my research showed a dedicated interest in what Giorgio Agamben calls *past potential futures*, which is a slightly different concept than the interest in past futures. Opposed to actualities, which can be described as "practical possibilities", *potentialities* represent "abstract possibilities" each present is pregnant with. Such potentialities are present, but not yet active or fully acknowledged - some of these potentialities will even lead to dead ends or alternatively become dead media. According to Agamben, reactivating these past potential futures is central to a politics of hope.

Part of such a project or a politics of hope could be what I have called, in my research project on the paradigm shift in the way artists reflect the historical avant-garde and the notion of utopia, "retroutopianism". Since the 1990s, with a younger generation of media artists (predominantly but not exclusively in Eastern Europe), there is a significant change in the reflection of the historical avant-garde which is grounded in a renewed interest in the notion of utopia (which is understood in a different way than the holistic or prescriptive utopias of the past). This shift is characterized by a growing artistic interest in bygone technological phantasies, formulated in early 20th century artistic and/or scientific contexts. "Retroutopian" projects do not detect primarily potentially totalitarian tendencies in the utopian ideas of the avant-garde (as it was the case in the 1980s, e.g. in the Moscow Conceptual School), but search predominantly for past - mostly unrealized - media technological concepts, ideas and phantasies. These were formulated not only by individual avant-garde artists (like Velimir Chlebnikov, Bertolt Brecht), but also by scientists and engineers (like Nikola Tesla, Herman Potočnik Noordung). This media archaeological

focus is symptomatic for a significantly changed notion of utopia: In today's technological environment, the notion of utopia is seen as a deeply emancipatory and visionary potential (therefore the connection to the politics of hope). In addition to that, as Siegfried Zielinski has pointed out in *Archaeology of Media*, quite often, these media archaeological excavations serve to criticize present developments.

The paradoxical expression "re-inventing radio" performs exactly what Gilles Deleuze has described in *Différence et répétition* as a «plentyful» or «full repetition». Such a repetition repeats and recycles past events / ideas, in this case the potentialities of past presents which never became actualities, and extracts or extrapolates their potentialities into the future. In the case of radio, "re-inventing radio" would mean looking into radio's past which was rich in potentialities (before it got regulated by the state), and this time make these potentialities become actualities. You have seven lives, give it a try, next level!

The current artistic interest in past potential futures does not only manifest itself in an amazing amount of fascinating projects dealing with obsolete technology (like Paul Slocum's dot matrix printer, Roger Wigger's hardware orchestra, Pongmechanik, micromusic, Joan Leandre's reyou projects and Blinkenlights) but also is obvious in a renewed interest in historical figures such as Nikola Tesla, Velimir Chlebnikov, Oskar Sala, Lev Theremin, and other representatives of technological-evolutionary sideways (if not dead ends).

If we look at current projects mapping the acoustic space of radio communication - Marko Peljhan's autonomous research unit *makrolab* which was started in 1997, the International Necronautical Society (INS) founded in 1999, the *TCM/Semaphore* project which is just about to kick off in Dunkerque, France (13-25 September), and certainly some more projects (radioqualia, e.g.) -- the shared interest in discovering past potential futures becomes apparent. I'll just talk about one example here.



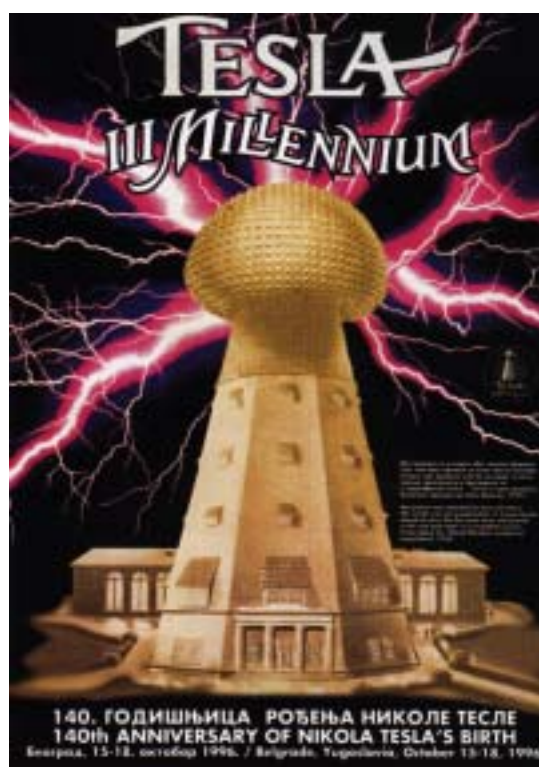
Marko Peljhan / Projekt Atol, *makrolab*, Rottneest Island (AUS), 2000

The makrolab, a mobile research laboratory built by Projekt Atol to map the topography of signals in the electromagnetic spectrum over a given location, has been operating since 1997 in remote places like, e.g. Rottneest Island on the West coast of Australia or, most recently, the island of Campalto near Venice, Italy (in 2003). Not unlike ECHELON, makrolab's main aim is to tap into as many kinds of different communications as possible (mobile phone conversations, satellite-aided navigation systems, and military and business communications) in order to show the vulnerability of telecommunication systems. On a more abstract level, it acts as a haptic interface between the material reality and the immaterial realm of signals that normally remains invisible, or, unintelligible. Until today makrolab has hosted many different groups of researchers and artists who have been working in a situation Peljhan calls "insulation/isolation". The "Insulation/Isolation" strategy which combines complete physical isolation from the urban surroundings with a total "connectedness" via different media intends to allow for a better "bird's eye view" on the topography of signals circulating between the urban centers. What's more, through this intensive isolation, on the micro-level of the makrolab develops a specific subjectivity, an „*affective sociality*"² which, according to Kodwo Eshun, distinguishes it from much of the sterility of most of the projects combining art and science. Peljhan's thesis is that a few individuals in isolation/insulation can produce more "evolutionary code" than big political movements.

While I do not want to go into discussing this thesis, what I would like to stress here is the importance of the poet **Velimir Chlebnikov** for this project. Chlebnikov, who was born in 1885 and died in 1922 is one of the most important and influential - although generally not very well known - representatives of Russian Futurism. In his seminal

² Eshun, Kodwo: Makrolab's Twin Imperatives and Their Children Too, in: *Makrolab* 2003, pp. 6-14, here: p. 7.

and truly visionary text *The Radio of the Future* (written in 1921 - more than a decade before Bertolt Brecht's often quoted "Radio Theory"), he formulated his view of the future role of radio. While his view is a pessimist one (pointing to the danger of the radio as a centralized propaganda tool à la "one sender, a thousand receivers" [Goebbels]), he also envisions the possibility of a truly dialogic, point-to-point, or one-to-one-communication via the radio by suggesting a "chess game between two people located in the geographic antipodes", or an "inspiring discussion between a person in America and a person in Europe". In many of his other texts written between 1915 and 1922 Chlebnikov was intensively working on the development of a true global language (*zvezdnyj jazyk* or star language) and attempted to deduce the laws of time from extensive historical calculations (thus making the future predictable). In addition to that, he claimed that wireless communication would play a crucial role for the development of new concepts of space and time. This is why, according to Lisa Haskell, Chlebnikov's work "reads as a charming and irresistible mixture of archaic futurology" and at the same time embodies "an uncannily contemporary vision." It should be stressed, however, that Peljhan does not simply "apply" Chlebnikov's ideas, but that it is rather Chlebnikov's broad interdisciplinary approach which today - in a time of renewed tectonic movements - makes him seem so appropriate.



Postcard produced for the 140. anniversary of Nikola Tesla, Belgrade, 1996

There are a lot of other works, not only by Marko Peljhan, but also by other artists, that are dedicated to or that are greatly inspired by the Serb-American inventor **Nikola Tesla** (1856-1943) who in 1884 emigrated to the United States and around 1900, according to Erik Davis, became the „ultimate visionary crank“³ (Marko Peljhan / Carsten Nicolai's *Wardenclyffe Situations* since 1997, Craig Baldwin's movie *Spectres of the Spectrum*, 2000, *PROJECT:BROADCASTING dedicated to Nikola TESLA*, Zagreb 2002). Since the mid-1990s Tesla is being re-discovered in the context of “expanded radio” projects because he was one of the first people to propagate the idea of a global wireless transmission/communication.

I would like to wrap up my thesis. I have been arguing that many artists, when looking into the rear-view mirror, are interested in re-discovering past potential futures. This media archeological approach to or interest in forgotten sideways of the history of technology, in a parallel history of unrealized trajectories of the technological-artistic imaginary is by no means a nostalgic one. Rather, by focussing their attention on what has been shed out by “progress”, thus on what has been left in a state of potentiality, these artists and projects can be said to participate in a “politics of hope” which has a deeply emancipatory impetus. They are thus participating, as Ghassan Hage has formulated, in a struggle over the possibility of perceiving potentialities already present in the past and the present in order to broaden the range of conceivable futures.

³ Davis, Erik: *Techgnosis. Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York 1998, pp. 68-75, here p. 69.