

Invisibility and Politics. On Spaces of the Political beyond the Visible

Inke Arns

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To sto ih ignoriscemo
ne znaci da ce cinjenice nestati
(<http://kuda.org>)

Facts do not cease to exist
because they are ignored.
(Aldous Huxley)

When on February 16, 2005 in Dortmund's main railway station, one of the most important junctions in Germany, the information display panels failed, confusion and literal disorientation reigned. It soon became clear that the reason for the breakdown was a very aged piece of equipment from the dawn of data processing. To be exact: an Intel 310 system with a 80286 processor and the Unix derivative Xerix. The computer, which had been continuously in use since the 1980s had simply given up the ghost. After several days an identically constructed machine was salvaged from the depths of the railway depot on which a backup could be installed. At the same time it became clear that today, only a few engineers master the operating skills for the old hard- and software.

It is astounding how many things in our everyday life are based today on software. We only become aware of it however when, as in the case of the Intel 310 system in Dortmund, the computer or the software stops functioning. Then the things taken for granted and accepted disappear, giving way to a quiet dismay. In such moments it is revealed which important functions (i.e. traffic control and regulation, in this case, for instance, "only" the information on arriving and departing trains) have already been sourced out to software today. A software error can potentially bring about total collapse, susceptibility to failure of digital systems can become the agent of total disappearance.

Disappearance in this context however does not only mean sudden breakdown, as in that which occurs when nothing functions anymore, rather refers to, paradoxically, exactly what happens when software-based systems function correctly. Simply put: The more things in daily life become regulated by software, the less sensually perceivable they are in everyday contact. That they disappear from direct view does not mean however that they are not there. Quite the opposite: immaterial structures that have been laid down in software are, and that is the paradox, at least as equally durable, if not even more effective than material structures and architecture. That the world around us is increasingly programmed, means that rules, conventions and relationships that are fundamentally changeable and negotiable become cast in software. Software thus proves itself a very hard material, immateriality as a quasi factual materiality – that however withdraws from our sensory perception. Disappearance means in this sense that through our increasingly software-based world, the world is *covertly* being made to disappear, and not by *force* as applies to the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Whether the world will be *successfully* made to disappear¹ through this depends on us, her inhabitants, whether we covertly, silently and still allow it to happen.

The exhibition “On Disappearance: Loss of World – Escaping from the World”, means for us rolling out a broad spectrum of implosions of the political and its consequences. The realm thus titled – that one could refer to as a looming software-supported implosion of the political – is broached to drastic effect² with the works “Herakles Concept: Cabin” by Lutz Dammbeck and “Psych/OS” by ubermorgen. Other works in contrast deal with specific political events and their representation in a variety of medias. In the chapter “Annihilations”, the incursions and violent losses of the individual/s’ world provoked by totalitarian power structures (e.g. in Alice Miceli’s “88 from 14.000”). In the chapter “Leaps in Time”, it is the visible and invisible delineations of borders, and their effects on individual economies of time, lifetime (e.g. in Multiplicity’s “Solid Sea 03: The Road Map”). The zone “Terrain Vague” shows unsecured and undetermined sites that as if shutdown, appear to be between palpable past and vague future. The profound paralysis that these places have

¹ “The secret of successfully letting something disappear lies in letting it secretly disappear” (Frank Stühlmeyer in this book.)

² This subject will play a central role in the activities planned up to 2007 by Hartware MedienKunstVerein with the keyword “Augmented Space“, after an initial treatment in the exhibition “Dispersed Moments of Concentration. Urban and Digital Spaces” (May-July 2005).

entered – most plainly noticeable in the work of Carl Michael von Hausswolff and Thomas Nordanstad – seem like the after effects of an anaesthetisation which sets in at the sight of a profoundly condensed modern epoch (understood as consecutive phases of colonisation, exploitation and disintegration). Finally, in “Anchorless“ are those precarious attempts collected (often abortive and often failed) to temporarily flee the world, i.e. via space travel (as in Komarov’s in Via Lewandowskys “Last Call“) or through drug consumption (Oliver Pietsch, “Tuned“, “Drugged“).

The uncanny disappearance of the world by means of software does not only have the deprivation of visibility and tangibility as a consequence but also a dematerialization of structures. Both effects are thereby reciprocally linked. “Immaterial“ does not mean however that these structures are less effective than their material counterparts. To understand the term “immaterial“ as opposed to “material“ means to misunderstand it. In fact one has to learn to comprehend the immaterial as something that establishes connections between single materialities and can thus due to exponentially rising computer abilities, in an extremely high speed manner calculate relationships between people and things, goods and individuals and subjects and objects. (i.e. create consumer profiles).

The covert disappearance of the world that expresses itself in a silent „standing-in relation-to-one-another“ will be ensured by software. Increasingly, in these performative programme codes, behavioural codes are laid down, as if anchoring them in the subconscious. Graham Harwood thus terms this unseen world, “invisible shadow world of process“.³ This shadowy world of processing has immediate political consequences for the real and virtual spaces in which we move today, in that they determine what is, as well as what is not possible in these spaces, and mobilize or immobilize their users. However this does not denote a suspension that results from system failure (as in the Dortmund Intel 310 system’s case). Rather, the immobilisations meant are those which are conditional to normal functioning: when the cash machine suddenly stops dispensing money, when an assembly ban is hung over virtual spaces (because the software does not permit the simultaneous presence of more than four people), when one cannot pass anymore through the

³ Graham Harwood, „Speculative Software“, in: Andreas Broeckmann/Susanne Jaschko (eds.), “DIY Media – Art and Digital Media, Software – Participation – Distribution. Transmediale.01“, Berlin, 2001, pp. 47–49, here p. 47.

security controls of one's company with one's chip card, or when upon returning to the states of the Schengen Agreement, one is detained for eighteen hours on the outer border of the EU, because the system identifies the number of the provisional passport as stolen and an international search warrant nearly ends in arrest.⁴ RFID-Tags⁵, with which via radio frequency technology can for example clearly identify goods and be picked up unnoticed at a distance of up to one kilometre, facilitate the compilation of detailed consumer profiles. Already electronic shackles are making prison without walls a reality today.

Gilles Deleuze recognizes in these ubiquitous forms of control an important indicator in today's "societies of control". These have superseded the "disciplinary societies" as described by Foucault. In place of enclosures in the "disciplinary societies", which Deleuze compared to casting moulds, monitoring and modulation have appeared resembling a "self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the next".⁶

In this sense one could speak of the present as of a post optical age in which the programme code, that according to Benjamin one could also term post optical unconscious, becomes "Law".⁷ Walter Benjamin defined the "optical unconscious" as an unconscious visual dimension of the material world that is normally filtered out of human consciousness and thus remains invisible. "Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man".⁸ This unconsciously penetrated space can through the use of mechanical recording techniques (photography and film: slow motion, magnification) be made visible.

In his conception of unconscious optics, Benjamin identifies the possibility of an impersonal, de-psychological unconscious. This approaches the vicinity of "post-optical unconscious". Now, however with optical recording and playback technology it

⁴ As happened to the members of the performance group andcompany&Co in August 2005 on their tour for the project, "europe an alien", through Southeastern Europe. <http://www.andco.de/>

⁵ Radio Frequency Identification Technology (RFID), cp. the entry in "Wikipedia", <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/RFID>

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control", in: "*L'autre journal*", Nr. I, May 1990

⁷ "Code is Law", the well-known dictum of the American lawyer, Lawrence Lessig.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography", in: *ibid*, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Frankfurt/Main 1977, p.50.

is not possible to see through this post-optical unconscious because it is no longer visually composed. Rather it distinguishes itself through transparency⁹, that is, invisibility. How, in spaces becoming so intangible, can political or artistic action articulate itself? How and where can potential (new) spaces for the political develop in the face of the software-supported disappearance of the world?

Various media and net art projects as well as projects from the realm of software art have in recent years developed approaches that will make visible the structures of economic, political and societal distribution of power in communication networks. Included in this are works by Jodi, mez, Knowbotic Research, etoy and – centrally – Marko Peljhan.¹⁰ As always the theme is – sometimes more, sometimes less directly – transferring information technology structures from a state of transparency to one of visibility or tangibility. This step alone is, in an age of the software-supported political implosion, an eminently political one. In any case as Gilles Deleuze stated back in 1990 „there is no need to fear or hope but only to look for new weapons“.¹¹

⁹ While the term in everyday usage stands for controllability through visibility, in computer science transparency can mean the exact opposite, namely that the interface is transparent and invisible and for the user, a much more expedient decrease in complexity remains concealed. Cp. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transparenz>

¹⁰ Cp. Inke Arns, „Faktur und Interface: Chlebnikov, Tesla und der himmlische Datenverkehr in Marko Peljhans makrolab (1997-2007)“, in: Katja Kwastek (ed.): "Ohne Schnur.... Kunst und drahtlose Kommunikation", Frankfurt/Main, 2005, S. 62-79

¹¹ Deleuze, op. cit.