

Ewa Wójtowicz  
Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań, Poland

## **The Invisible Strikes Back. Neoanalog Tendencies in Contemporary Media Art**

Motto: „Never again will the real have to be produced (...)”  
Jean Baudrillard, 1981

Contemporary digital culture produces numerous copies, clones and appropriations of the past artworks. Artists redefine the past, creating an intertextual relation between the original and its copy, reaching both for the legendary and the forgotten projects from the 70s. The art duo Eva and Franco Mattes from [0100101110101101.org](http://0100101110101101.org), have so far conducted six [\*Synthetic Performances\*](#) (from 2007)<sup>1</sup>, based on seminal projects of various artists. Among them are: Joseph Beuys (*7000 Oaks*, 1982-1987), Vito Acconci (*Seedbed*, 1972), Valie Export (*Tapp und Tastkino*, 1968-1971), Gilbert & George (*The Singing Sculpture*, 1968), Chris Burden (*Shoot*, 1971) and Marina Abramovic (*Imponderabilia*, 1977). The performances do not duplicate their historical inspirations completely, as they take place in the Second Life. The main feature of such a gesture is the removal of palpability and the physical commitment of an artist (connected even with pain, as in Chris Burden's case). Instead of a real event in a real time and place, we encounter a synthetic event, made of pixels and – ontologically – being just a file. However, this shift from the physical and analogue past to the virtual and digital present, causes an ontological consequence on what an art project is, and, specifically, what happens to a performance as such. It also affects the relation between an artist and an audience, which is now divided in two groups: viewers in a gallery and viewers online, both though perceiving the project on the screen. The latest group – the inhabitants of Second Life

– often play the same role as their predecessors from the 70s – they encounter an art event without caution.

The artists from 0100101110101101.org share their attitude with another artistic duo, New York-based [MTAA](#) (M.River & T.Whid Art Assoc.)<sup>2</sup>, who have been re-creating conceptual projects since 2001 in a series of Updates. Besides *vitoAcconciUpdate*, and *onKawaraUpdate*, (both 2001) they have adapted *One Year Performance 1978-1979 (aka Cage Piece)* by Sam (Tehching) Hsieh - an extremely radical example of isolation and nuisance. Their [1 year performance video \(aka samHsiehUpdate\)](#), 2004, was available online to the viewers, who could watch the performance for a whole year, while logged. In the version by MTAA we can see seemingly identical rooms and both artists seem to behave normally, except for the fact that it is not a real-time performance but a previously recorded series of clips. Eventually, all the constraints: solitude, boredom, and limitation, are transferred from an artist to a viewer. As Mark Tribe notices: “If one watches for an entire year – a daunting task – one becomes an official ‘collector’ and is given a unique data file that documents the performance in code”<sup>3</sup>.

While updating conceptual projects in the digital language, alters their meaning and builds an intertextual context, nowadays we can identify a new approach. The endless remix of cultural contents is typical for media artists, as digital media enable to create - to paraphrase Jean Baudrillard - “a copy without its original”. Sometimes media aspire to copy not only certain artefacts or events, but the world as such, as we can see in the Second Life. However, the way from the real to the virtual has two directions, and there are artists who mimic the invisible items in the real material.

Neoanalog tendencies are based on mixed reality strategies, however they reach for a simulated space to re-build it in the real world. Very often the main field of inspiration is gaming, and it is an experience of a certain generation. Apparently, the world of symbols and icons had been real enough for some game players who soon became game developers, and some of them became artists.

The aim of this paper is to analyze what happens when digital – and therefore immaterial – symbols are re-created in the real world as physical objects. Their location is strongly connected to geo-tagging and the awareness that the two – seemingly opposite – worlds have now more in common. What are the artistic, socio-political and philosophical consequences of such interventions in the reality? This paper presents a few examples of artistic approach, dealing with neanalog problems and the real space. Aram Bartholl's works reflect the tendency of taking the signs and symbols from the virtual realm and reconstructing them in a material medium, often of lo-fi quality. As he puts them back in the real world, he implements them in the physical space. Therefore he reaches for the tactile experience instead of pixels. However, the ontological status of those things is questionable. How can we call it re-construction if they have never been constructed in the real material? How these items immerse so well in the world around us, though we recognize their unusual, dislocated origin?

### **Art**

Intersections of the real and the virtual can be traced back in the conceptual art, if not in the ready-mades and other artworks that involve some kind of imaginary and immaterial space. Since the emergence of so-called new media art, the opposition between the real and the virtual became an important category. There were telepresence installations and interactive simulations using some artificial intelligence agents. The journey into the newly- colonized territory was just beginning and the critical websites were full of optimistic statements on how the real bodies soon might become obsolete, or pessimistic visions of virtual escapism.

Artists who formed the first scene of European net.art (the 'dot' movement). had their previous experiences in non-material media. Only very few had a previous history of traditional media like painting or sculpture. However, the sculptural qualities were often useful while talking about the virtual space, even the term 'space' itself suggested something of 3D qualities.

### **Life**

The two realities meet in every aspect of our life. We can chat to someone over a cup of coffee, texting messages on a mobile phone, at the same time. We can have memory implants that are in our mobile phones and notebooks. We can play games that require learning some new spatial and visual rules. However, we still recognize the difference between the real and the virtual and we all know that mixing the rules might be dangerous. How many times though we missed the opportunity of ‘clicking-and-closing’ a window of some real uncomfortable situation?

### **Art in Life**

Art in the public space is another important issue again. We have seen it all: pop art sculptures, land art, conceptual art, critical interventions, radical appropriations, culture jamming and street art. Audiowalks and graffiti. CCTV cameras performers and city bloggers. Psychogeography and locative hotspots. However, they mostly reached for an inspiration from the realm of art, they were kind of Alberti’s window to another reality.

As for most of us growing up in the mediated world was a formative experience (we all have memories of early video games, Atari computers, Nintendos and first steps in the Internet) we have been learning how to read the signs and icons almost simultaneously with other knowledge we used to gain. The famous net.art piece by Vuk Cosic [\*History of Art for Airports\*](#) (1997) was about recognizing iconic images of classical artworks, reduced to a pictogram. Another project by Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon, [\*BorderXing Guide\*](#) (2002) was all about finding one’s way in no-man’s land, adjusted for Web 1.0 conditions. However, when geotagging and online mapping started to be a standard feature of every Web 2.0 service, we have encountered a new problem. One is the implementation of real (g.e. geotags) features from the symbolic world of virtuality into the real life. It’s like making visible something that already was there, like an abstract idea that needed to be written down. Another is creating objects that relate to the world of games which are fiction.

### **(Second) Life in Art**

Cloning objects and images in the immaterial world of pixels is rather easy, though we rarely think about ontological consequences of such an action. That is what happens with the updates of conceptual projects, by MTAA or Jill Miller ([I am making art too](#), 2003)<sup>4</sup>. There are also some projects based in materializing the immaterial, like [News Knitter](#) (2007)<sup>5</sup> by Ebru Kurbak and Mahir M. Yavuz. This all represents a neanalog approach that is based on making things and asking – seemingly very simple questions.

[Aram Bartholl](#)'s works are based on games, virtual platforms and forms taken straight from the virtual world, such as pixels. His experiments with a handmade pixel were exhibited on [Transmediale07](#). Both *Random Screen* (2006) and *Paper Pixel* (2005) resemble the virtual categories but they are created from mundane materials, like paper, recycled beer cans and tealights. As Jean Baudrillard states: „It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.”<sup>6</sup>. The problem is – what is more real in this relation, established by Bartholl? Is it the original which is supposed to be immaterial, or is it, actually, its material copy with its physical features? Apparently, the key role is played by the viewer, who recognizes this object as a copy of a virtual original.

Not also the single ‘atoms’ of the virtual are examined by the artist, but also the whole, figurative and complicated narratives, such as games.

The game *World of Warcraft* was the inspiration for the *WoW* workshops, conducted during the Ars Electronica 2007, where the visitors could work on their own names, opr nicknames, cut out and mounted, so they could proudly wear them on the streets of Linz. One could recognize a character from the game applied to the real world, and for some viewers it was just a funny name made of yellow letters, for some it was a hint. Very similar idea was visible in *Chat* (2007) and *Speech Bubble* (2007) where symbols of verbal communication and interaction were created as heavy and slightly inconvenient to wear, but still wearable 3D objects.

A *Missing Image* is long-sleeve t-shirt derived from the look of *Second Life* avatars. Due to a transfer error sometimes their bodies are white with no image of some clothing. Also, the DIY aspect was extremely important. The handmade items representing virtual clothing from the Second Life, cubes designed in 3D software, using a photographed texture of some surfaces from the city walls or pavements, printed T-Shirts listing social networking sites. All those playful items have a deeper meaning though.

Sometimes the artist provides just some message to be encoded, like in *Tagging* (2007), where Bartholl has painted manually the complicated pattern of a Semacode. When photographed with a mobile phone with a relevant software, it was opening a link to a specific place, like a page from Google with some specific records, or a quote “The Internet does not make the knowledge unnecessary”.

The thing is, that recognizing the symbols and following the traces requires two things

-having a proper tool e.g. a mobile phone enabling to open the way to the *Tagging* (2007) world

-having a knowledge of games' world or other realm of particular semantic/semiotic language, to decode it properly.

The interfaces provided in the Second City project, which was a part of Ars Electronica, were very simple: trade counters, rooms, streets. Apparently, neither items nor places were the real interfaces, but actually people who took part in the workshops or other occasions, and those who were able to read the message. Along with activities that are open to the public, Aram Bartholl creates objects that are derived from the virtual geography of games and 3D worlds. The simulation is not mimetic, it's symbolic. The tree consists of half-transparent layers until it's ready. So, the structure of yet unfinished tree was the inspiration to the *Tree* (2007). What I find important in this project, is that it is unfinished, when it comes to its virtual shape, but symbolic enough to represent a tree in the real world.

As the artist explains, in his works it's the audience who is the real interface, it's not the artefact. However, equally important, in my opinion, is the urban space in which the

symbolic objects are implemented. Like the huge geotag, derived from Google Earth, which was built by Bartholl in his project *Map* (2006) and set on the Gubener Street in Berlin. What happened to this red, balloon-shaped object? It's origin is virtual, it's function is semiotic, and it relates to the symbolic space of a map that is created using satellites and interactive software. All of us recognize this object, and we are somehow familiar with seeing it on the images of streets and other places. But what happens when we see it as a physical object, made of wood, cardboard and fabric, standing remotely on a street? It seems like it may be fully understood only for the Google Earth (and other similar applications) users. But that's not the most important feature, as art has always been a language of some kind, readable for those who have known how to read it. The role of symbol as such is not a new problem then. In my opinion the problem is: where is the interface? Who is in charge of it? What happens to such notions as: space, object, location? Which additional knowledge is required from a viewer to participate in such projects? They belong to the virtual world that is "out there" and, seems like, increasingly, we can experience these two worlds simultaneously.

If we recall two utopian ideas of creating a 1:1 map – one comes from Lewis Carroll in his novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1889)<sup>7</sup>, and another from Jorge Luis Borges<sup>8</sup>. Both are based on fiction, however it is useful to recall them.

Carroll writes about 1:1 map, which "(...) has never been spread out, yet...the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country and shut off the sunlight! So we use the country itself, as its map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."<sup>9</sup>

Borges writes about the perfection of cartography in a utopian state, which led to creating a map of the Imperium that had an actual size of this Imperium. It had been so perfect already that it could not be developed any further, so the next generations decided to abandon it.

Polish theoretician of culture and new media, Andrzej Gwóźdź, writes about the shift of the signs in the movies, but his theory can be applied also to the media as such. He states that a sign does not refer to the real (in the ontological meaning) anymore, but to itself. So, **the visible** is not **the real** anymore<sup>10</sup>. He call it the self-reference of the simulacres. As the

term simulacrum, derived from Baudrillard is a keyword here, I would like to comment on this case. In 1981 Jean Baudrillard wrote: “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory — precession of simulacra — it is the map that engenders the territory.”<sup>11</sup>

The territory, with all its gaps and terra incognita areas, is examined in two projects, both dealing with the problem of the locative media, or rather locative interfaces. One is a site-specific project by a Polish artist, the graduate of Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań, Katarzyna Kesicka, *238x504 /Po Horyzont (To the Horizon)*, (2005). She used billboard spaces in Poznań and Warsaw, which are normally covered by some commercial content, and made them transparent, using the photograph of this very place, or to speak more precisely, of the real space that was covered by the billboard. Having done this very simple action, Kesicka opens the Alberti’s window, though she does not create an alternative reality within it, but rather re-creates the lost order. Can we repair the gaps in the reality like that?

Another example is *Self-Portrait with a Webcam* by [Josef Klammer](#) (2007) in which the author has identified the city webcams and stood in front of them with a notebook, searching for his image in the Internet at the same time. Where was he in fact? To recall the controversial and seemingly outdated quotes from Baudrillard for the last time in this paper: „The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory — precession of simulacra — it is the map that engenders the territory (...)

.”<sup>12</sup>. The neanalog objects that have a virtual background but are actually a rehash fit this description surprisingly well.

Is it a comeback or a strike back then? Where it comes back from? The neanalog attitude is all about giving material shape to the immaterial signs and symbols that are derived from the virtual world, to which they were implemented straight from the realm of imagination. Andrzej Gwóźdź identifies the intertextual practices in the contemporary cinema as hybrid

forms and writes about “balancing in the interface between the media and their texts”<sup>13</sup>. As the materiality strikes back, yet in a different meaning, we all have to balance between the medium and its (coded) message, and to encode it sometimes we have to play the role of the interface.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Goodbye Privacy, Ars Electronica 2007*, ed. Gerfried Stocker & Christine Schoepf, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2007.

Mark Tribe, Reena Jana, *New Media Art* Taschen, Köln 2006

Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulations*, [in:] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed Mark Poster. Stanford University Press, 1998, pp.166-184.

Andrzej Gwóźdź, *Obrazy i rzeczy. Film między mediami*, Universitas, Kraków 2003.

- <sup>1</sup> <http://0100101110101101.org/home/performances/index.html> (05.05.2008)
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.mteww.com/> (05.05.2008)
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Tribe, Reena Jana, *New Media Art*, Taschen, Köln, 2006, p. 68.
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.jillmiller.net/i\\_am\\_making\\_art\\_too.htm](http://www.jillmiller.net/i_am_making_art_too.htm) (05.05.2008)
- <sup>5</sup> <http://casualdata.com/newsknitter/> (05.05.2008)
- <sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, [in:] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, [ed.] Mark Poster. Stanford University Press, 1998. Online: [http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard\\_Simulacra.html](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html) (19.02.2008)
- <sup>7</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Macmillan and Co. 1889. Online: <http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/11/1946/frameset.html> (15.02.2008)
- <sup>8</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *O ścisłości w nauce*, [in:] *Powszechna historia nikczemności*, (transl. by Stanisław Zembrzuski, Andrzej Sobol-Jurczykowski), Warszawa 1976.
- <sup>9</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*...op.cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Andrzej Gwóźdź, *Obrazy i rzeczy. Film między mediami*, Universitas, Kraków 2003, p. 164.
- <sup>11</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, [in:] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, [ed.] Mark Poster. Stanford University Press, 1998. Online: [http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard\\_Simulacra.html](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html) (19.02.2008)
- <sup>12</sup> ibidem.
- <sup>13</sup> A. Gwóźdź, op.cit., p. 167. (transl. by Ewa Wójtowicz)