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Against the Apparatus

Vilém Flusser, the well-known philosopher wrote: “experimental photographers (...) are playing against the camera” (Flusser, 2000: 81).¹ With the permanent emergence of new techniques, this presents a growing challenge and an increasing state of excitement. Coming to the conclusion; the experimental artist is consciously looking for possibilities to make the program fail. Their aim in doing so is to highlight the significant features; to ask the fundamental questions.

(Making a short detour.) Gene Youngblood wrote: “All art is experimental or it isn’t art. Art is research, (...) catalyst to change” (Youngblood, 1970: 65).² It is true; essentially.

Jump to the development of video art! Magnet TV (1965) is an early example of Nam June Paik’s “prepared televisions.” The magnet distorts the TV image into an abstract form.³ The original meaning disappears. We can say: most of video art is

1 “(...) so-called experimental photographers (...) know they are playing against the camera. They are not aware that they are attempting to address the question of freedom in the context of apparatus in general” (Flusser, 2000: 81). Apparatus: (...) e.g. the camera, the computer (...); organization or system that enables something to function. (Lexicon of Vilém Flusser in: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*).

2 “The notion of experimental art, therefore, is meaningless. All art is experimental or it isn’t art. Art is research, whereas entertainment is a game or conflict. We have learned from cybernetics that in research one’s work is governed by one’s strongest points, whereas in conflicts or games one’s work is governed by its weakest moments. We have defined the difference between art and entertainment in scientific terms and have found entertainment to be inherently entropic, opposed to change, and art to be inherently negentropic, a catalyst to change. The artist is always an anarchist, a revolutionary, a creator of new worlds imperceptibly gaining on reality. He can do this because we live in a cosmos in which there’s always something more to be seen. When finally we erase the difference between art and entertainment—as we must to survive—we shall find that our community is no longer a community, and we shall begin to understand radical evolution” (Youngblood, 1970: 65).

3 Paik, N. J. (1965). *Magnet TV*. [Modified black-and-white television set and magnet]. “Magnet TV is an early example of Nam June Paik’s ‘prepared televisions’, in which he altered the television image or its physical casing. This work, which was featured in Paik’s first solo exhibition in New York, consists of a seventeen-inch black-and-white set on which an

equal to the failure of electricity. The video-synthesizer is based upon this operation.⁴ This is the essence of video art...⁵ So, video art, which is based on electricity, opened the possibility of new “audio-vision” (Chion, 1994); altering easily audio and video.

Very unusual uses of applications or software open new horizons as well. Not knowing the real functions of software may surprise us with visual depictions of which programmer has not even dreamed. Artists enlarge; moreover, they stop the original capacity of the media. For an (experimental) artist, there is no bad, abandoned raw material. The “aesthetics of failure” and/or effect of destroying may become yet more accentuated nowadays. Tools have become flexible, easy and ‘colorful’ in ways never seen.

Error and chance/accident are not far from each other. Error/failure is a transcendent strength. We do not know the components of chance; in this way, it appears as an error for us.

What about the loop? The endless loop is a clumsy moment of hesitation; a kind of stumbling – as Saverio Verini writes in his study (Verini, 2016).⁶

I would like to introduce an example of my works of art in connection with our theme; “against the apparatus.”⁷

I make Computed Tomography (CT) animations. Computed tomography is an X-ray-based examining method applied in medical service. Applying such a scientific picture-analysing technique in art by itself is quite unusual. I place objects in the CT-capsule which are totally alien from the normal use of this technology, including a TV, a fragment/part of an old computer or sometimes I apply a wire-composition. All these works of art were supported by the Health Centre of Kaposvár University. Metal causes disturbances of the magnetic field. It is considered to be a failure in CT-technology. At the same time, their aesthetic aspect proved interesting too. I did not attempt to eliminate the disturbance, but on the contrary, I strengthened it. I composed an animation strip from the picture slides. The whole work of art is presented as an installation.

It is worth-while to write some sentences about the sound, too, which is connected to the above-mentioned work of art. The chance and the “dislocated apparatus” created in this case a particular expression of form. The sound-environments/textures set out from text. The editing mode of TextEdit Speech does

industrial-sized magnet rests. The magnetic field interferes with the television’s electronic signals, distorting the broadcast image into an abstract form that changes when the magnet is moved.” (Whitney.org. [online] Available at: <http://collection.whitney.org/object/6139> [Accessed 12 Nov. 2016].)

4 Paik, N. J. and Abe, Sh. (1969/92). *Video-Synthesizer*.

5 E.g.: Paik, N. J. (1973). *Global Groove*. [Audio-video, color, 28:30 min.].

6 “...the endless loop that soon becomes an obsessive repetition... (...) ...the automatism of the loop that, while evoking a process of industrial production, is actually a parody of this very process, as it appears to be an assembly line deprived of any function or purpose, so that the images it transmits become an end unto themselves. GIFs are even clumsy and awkward, usually with a short, almost imperceptible, moment of hesitation – a kind of stumbling – at the end of the sequence before it starts its next repetition.” (Verini, 2016: 24-25)

7 Gyenes, Zs. (2015). *Synchrony Opus 104 (CT)*. [Audio-video, MPEG-2, 1280x720 px, 00:36 min., loop] Pécs: property of the artist.

not know what to do with the frequently repeated sounds, with the unarticulated forms. The apparatus begins to stammer, misses vowels and consonants. It results in a music-like, polyphonic expression due to a repetitive structure. Synchrony is the name of my audio-video series which consists of more than one hundred opuses. Here a sound event and a visual event meet in synchrony.⁸

As we mentioned earlier; video art equals a failure of electricity. The classic video-artists often produced abstract visual appearances. It was, above all, due to the capacity of electricity. The double characteristic of techno-media, which means that every medium is a reproduction, but at the same time it is also manipulation, have brought us to the present moment. First of all, the artists apply the manipulative characteristics of the media. The artist is especially conscious when committing an error. One makes it therefore to surpass the reproductive character of the media.

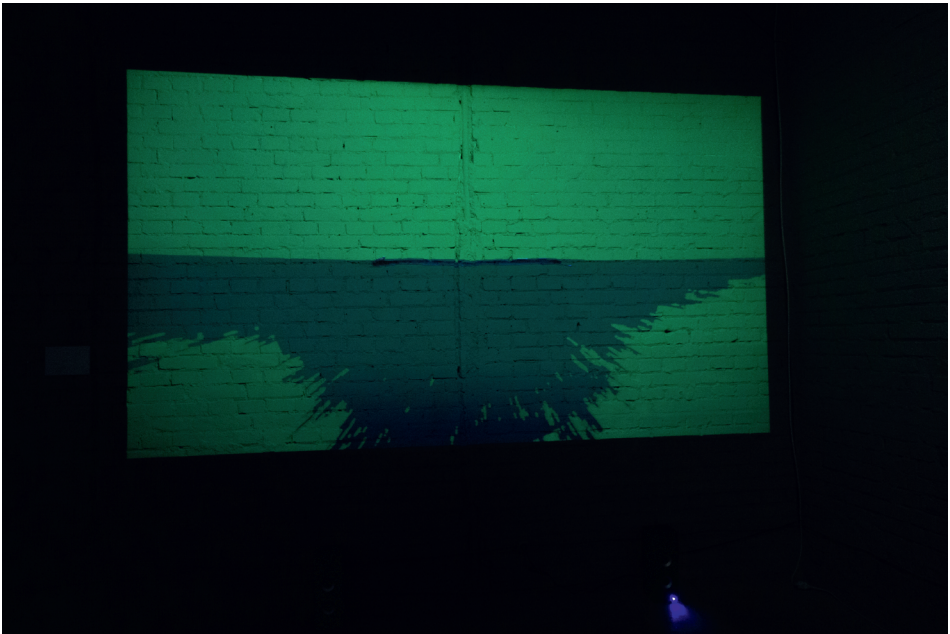
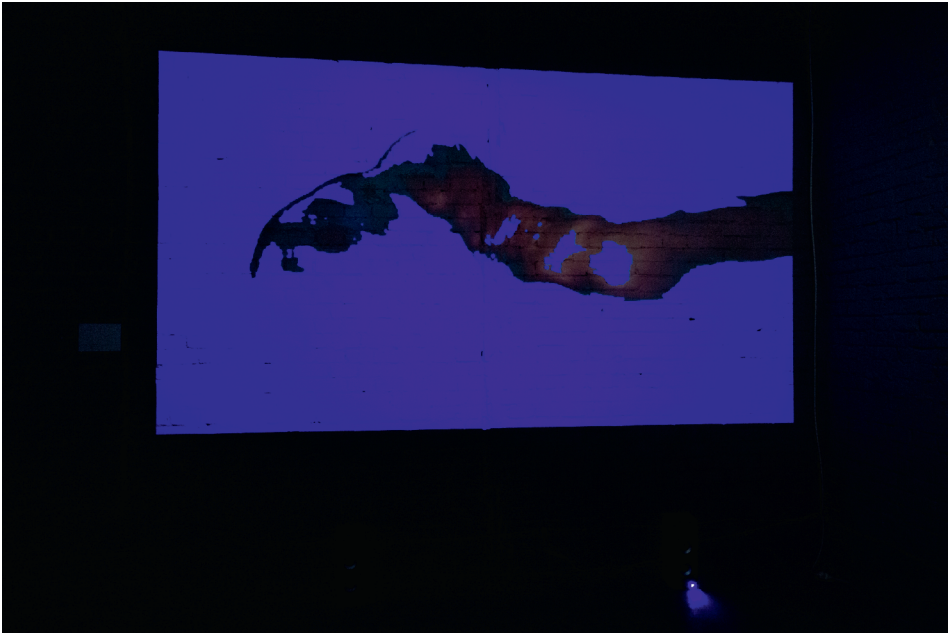
Abstraction passes for error in the territory of techno-media. These are, after all, typical reproductive media (e.g. photography, film, video, xerox, X-ray, fax). Abstraction goes against the apparatus. Abstract art, "is either completely non-representational, or [...] converts forms observed in reality into patterns which are read by the spectator primarily as independent relationships, rather than with reference to the original source" (Lucie-Smith, 1995).⁹ We use the term abstract art according to the second part of this definition. We would initiate a new term, concrete video art for the seeing distinctly, but we think that it would cause much complication (Lucie-Smith, 1995).¹⁰ "Abstraction proceeds in a reductive manner. (...) Abstraction transforms matter into something intellectual (it abstracts and idealizes an object); Concretion transforms something intellectual into matter (it concretizes and objectifies an idea)" (Jäger, 2005: 19).

Meanwhile, the definition of video art would be: "television and video-recording technology used in works of art" (Lucie-Smith, 1995). I would like to introduce an extension of this definition of video art: video is electronic/digital motion photography for which the technique serves as a basis by not only television and video-recording, but other reproductive techno-media like fax, xerox, X-Ray, CT and MRI. In case of techno-media, which is based on still pictures, the motion picture is created by frame by frame. This type of electronic motion picture could be

8 "A *point of synchronization*, or *synch point*, is a salient moment of an audiovisual sequence during which a sound event and a visual event meet in synchrony. It is point where the effect of synchresis (see below) is particularly prominent, rather like an accented chord in music. (...) Synchresis (a word I have forged by combining *synchronism* and *synthesis*) is the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time. This join results independently of any rational logic." (Chion, 1994: 58, 63)

9 See also: figurative art, non-objective, non-representational.

10 Concrete Art is: "Art composed of simple, non-representational visual forms, linked to the notion of structure as a continuous organizing principle (see Theo van Doesburg, *Manifesto of Concrete Art*, 1930). The name was chosen in preference to abstract art on the grounds that the artist's activity is the reverse of a process of abstraction. Max Bill defined Concrete Art as the effort 'to represent abstract thoughts in a sensuous and tangible form.'" (Lucie-Smith, 1995)



Zsolt Gyenes, *Make No Mistake* exhibition, Fuga Budapest Centre of Architecture, view of the exhibition, fot. Krzysztof Siatka

also named video-animation. So, abstract video art is a result of reductive processes, manners.

As we hinted above, it is more complicated when we talk about techno-media, like film, photography or video. These media have reproduction and manipulation characteristics. Reproductive character means a non-breakable automatism based on “physical” connection to the outside reality, where automatism is indicated by the machine (apparatus). On the other hand, all forms of such pictures additionally have a manipulative character: are being “made.” This character is connected to the creator, the maker, the person. If it was not “manipulative,” we would not talk about arts in this respect. The two characters always occur together and at times the former, at other times the latter grows stronger. Furthermore, this medium is characterized by the reproductive nature in most cases “hiding” manipulation, the “made product.” In case of an abstract video the manipulative nature dominates and may take over so strongly that nearly nothing of the reproductive character is left.

The fact that a medium like photography or video, taking its objects exclusively from the outside reality and the question whether such an art can have the justification of taking distance, moreover, deviate from this inevitable physical relation – can be regarded as a fundamental topic in the field of photographic abstraction. Photography has to build an automatic, immediate, analogue physical contact with the outside reality that is essential to become tangible in the process of exposure – otherwise we cannot talk of photography. This automatism is the creator of photographic character.

Every kind of photography where the illusion of recognisable vision is visibly transposed, where it becomes “distorted” and modified, can be called abstract. The “umbilical cord” to the reality seen on the outside does not disappear, however, the change is recognisable and so even the viewer is forced to become conscious of it. Whenever it is not quite clear what a photograph shows, we grow accustomed to posing the question: “what is it?” because we know that it has to represent something known, something recognisable. We are a little bit abashed if left without enough reference point. Abstract photography/video includes a particularly wide range of photography, from close-ups to solarisation and to almost entirely distorted, unrecognisable expression forms (Gyenes, 2010).

Abstract techno-media can be divided into two separate modes: abstracting the visible (by reducing complex visual information); and visualising the invisible (by intensifying information through image-given methods) (Jäger, Krauss and Reese, 2005: 252). While images of these modes contain extra-pictorial references, the concrete (techno-media) art renounces all such obligations (Jäger, Krauss and Reese, 2005: 252).¹¹

11 Concrete Photography: “Photography, which produces ‘reality’ and turns her own fundamental principles and laws into its very subject: it is photography of photography. Its works are characterized by their self-referentiality and autopoiesis: they exclusively thematize their own pictorial conditions. External ‘reality’ is ignored (iconoclasm, symbolism). Concrete photographs are objects of themselves, as signs they are indices, symptoms. They are generated by fusion of her very pure and own media: light, photosensitive material and the photograph’s ‘apparatus’. Like other concrete arts (in painting, music, poetry, film) concrete

In his book, *Vision in Motion* (1947), László Moholy-Nagy listed and systematised the eight varieties of photographic vision. Different systems, like Jäger's and Moholy-Nagy's can be synchronised. E.g. the "abstraction of the visible" (Jäger, Krauss and Reese, 2005: 252) is harmonised with "distorted seeing" (e.g. solarisation). The "visualisation of the invisible" corresponds to Moholy's "slow" (e.g. long exposure), "intensified" (e.g. macrophoto) and "penetrative seeing" (e.g. X-ray) (Moholy-Nagy, 1947: 207-208).¹²

Examples of abstract video works include, for instance, the work of Takeshi Murata. The American artist "vibrates" his expressive forms on the verge of still and motion picture (e. g. *Untitled – Silver*, 2006). His "distorted seeing" builds upon the characteristics of digital processes; generates records with "codec-failure," which is an interesting example of the recurrent territory tagged "the aesthetics of mistakes." In his works, sound and picture are involved inseparably. The special remixes of old movie fragments come back to life in utterly new, unprecedented ways. Murata's works of art are "glitch-alikes"; deliberate, planned, created, designed and artificial opuses. The "pure glitch" is accidental, coincidental, appropriated, found and real (Moradi, 2004).¹³

Also the writer of these lines has prepared numerous works "oscillating" on the verge of still and motion picture where photographic image is the basis (e.g. I do not feel any nostalgia, 2009-2010). The works reach their final form in course of multiple modification stages. Penetrating seeing has its roots in CT and MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) pictures. Distorted seeing is being shaped by effects and software "skills." Here, too, the aesthetics of mistake do gain importance; by utilising programs originally designed for different reasons and thus their real function unknown to the creator (e.g. in medicine), but this is exactly what makes it all exciting. Rapid and slow seeing become reality by setting the process apart into still images, in order to then "slow them down" and melt them together ("new time management"). The space of sound and picture strengthen each other.

Montage and remix are related notions, solutions. If we are looking for the preliminaries of motion picture that led to today's widespread, hybrid-like solutions, we have to mention the extraordinary works of the pope and creator of video-art, Nam June Paik (see mentioned earlier). The characteristics of video, as the first electronic medium, can be recognised mainly in its new type of time management and electronic modifications – in relation to that occurring previously to film. Electro-magnetic interference makes an immediate depiction of synthetic colours with their possible distortion forms. Paik's video-synthesiser was the basis for each electronic

photographs opens a specific form of art" (Jäger, Krauss and Reese, 2005: 252). "Abstract Photography idealizes an object; Concrete Photography objectifies an idea" (Jäger, 2005: 19).

12 Eight varieties of photographic vision: Abstract, Exact, Rapid, Slow, Intensified, Penetrative, Simultaneous and Distorted seeing (Moholy-Nagy, 1947: 207-208).

13 "Pure glitch is only the one that emerges unexpectedly, due to a malfunction or change of voltage that inhibits electrical flow. Therefore, it is not intentional but it appears accidentally, as it is triggered by machine-made errors. *Glitch-alike*, on the other hand, is referring to a 'constructed' glitch, or a man-made 'error' that is being re-appropriated as a creative practice" (Moradi, 2004). References to Moradi in: Menkman (2011) and Sotiraki (2014).

mixer to come. An emblematic realisation of this new type of time management was first executed in the “tunnel effect” and other, similar “circuit, closed solutions.” Video is a transition to computer. In his work *Beatles Electroniques* from 1966-69, Paik electronically modified a live television broadcast previously recorded (with camera). Sequences – together with the sound material *Four Loops* by Ken Werner – do not underline the heroism of pop icons but present the four Beatles as media victims. Similarly, Paik is also a reformer who sensed and advanced today’s solutions in a genius way in relation to his works such as *Global Groove* (1973), or *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984). He mixes television and satellite live broadcasts, thus creating a specific – rather chaotic – remix on the basis of neo-avantgarde, pop culture and television expression, as their medley.

The division into elements, succeeded by their reediting (by adding, subtracting, modifying, changing, superimposing, ‘melting’ etc.) may lead to a new style, a new sound, a new design etc. Technique plays a crucial role in this; it defines quality. Basic technology of remix is editing and thinking in stripes (sound) and layers (image). A unique polyphony is born where – besides the horizontal – also the vertical relation between individual elements gains power. In relation to movies, the connection (montage) of individual images (shots) to each other results in a horizontal (linearly depicted) relation. A new dimension is created by a collective upturn of images “settled behind each other” (layers), and their transition into each other. An example for the former: *The Eye is Never Filled* (2005) by Ken Nordine; for the latter: the art of Jeremy Blake.

In conclusion we can state that in the world of photographic image-based techno-media the artist is bound to play against the apparatus. They do it to create a real work of art. What is artificial is constantly laden with errors, which create an indispensable part of the creative method. In this aspect, errors include the loop, a video with an abstract world of images, or rather unorthodox uses of software.

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Illustrations

1. Gyenes, Zs. (2015). *Synchrony Opus 104 (CT)*. [Audio-video, MPEG-2, 1280x720 px, 00:36 min., loop] Pécs: property of the artist, stills.
2. Gyenes, Zs. (2016). *Synchrony Opus 118 (Equivalent)*. [Digital frame, audio-video, MPEG2, 01:25 min., loop] Pécs: property of the artist, stills.
3. Gyenes, Zs. (2016). *Synchrony Opus 122 (Decollage)*. [Digital frame, audio-video, MPEG2, 00:38 min., loop] Pécs: property of the artist, stills.

Appendix

Short descriptions of my exhibited works of art in the #error_in.art:

Gyenes, Zs. (2016). *Synchrony Opus 118 (Equivalent)*.

As the basement of this work of art I used an archaic piece of hardware, the Cathode Ray Tube monitor. I made alterations of it. The image and the sound are modified in synchrony, so together.

Gyenes, Zs. (2016). *Synchrony Opus 122 (Decollage)*.

I used different modal way softwares as usually one does. It has been caused random appearing of the visual part of the work. The variant method leads to deconstruction. I created the audio part of it from a geometric form, splitting the square mechanically to produce variations in repetitive way.

Gyenes, Zs. (2016). *Decollage*. [Mixed media, 70x100 cm] Pécs: property of the artist.

This work connects with the two audio-video works of art. Homage to Wolf Vostel's Tv dé-coll/age, 1959-1963.

Abstract

Permanently emerging new techniques present a growing challenge and an increasing state of excitement. The experimenting artist works against the apparatus; he or she is looking for possibilities to make the program fail. Their aim in doing so is to highlight the significant features; to ask the fundamental questions. There is no such thing as bad, abandoned raw material. The "aesthetics of failure" and/or effect of destroying may become yet more accentuated nowadays. The error is a magical/transcendent strength. The error, the chance work like blood transfusion – they are thrilling. The chance is a coherent mass the components of which are unknown. In this way it appears to us as failure.