

report

LEAF: Liverpool East European Electronic Arts Forum

12-14 April 1997

Alexei Shulgin, the first speaker at the conference organised by Iliana Nedkova for the Foundation for Arts and Creative Technology, described himself as "the director of a fake organisation I established myself". It was a good introduction to the East European world of electronic media arts, a combination of rough pragmatism - being 'director' of anything is a godsend for visa applications - and unreality which pervaded the debates and presentations of this two-day symposium over the first weekend of Video positive 97.

Shulgin's astute classification of net art into those that respond to the net and those that intervene in it - his examples were JoDi and Heath Bunting's irrational org - was the thin end of a very large wedge. We are still at the beginnings of genuine internet, and the US domination of the scene has closed our eyes, especially in the UK, to what options other traditions can open up for us. Perhaps this is the legacy of the cold war. We never knew, or scarcely got a chance to find out about, the massive surrealist cultures of Eastern Europe. We were told by our own cultural commissar that socialist realism ruled the roost, that we wouldn't be interested, that it was all escapism and propaganda. As a result, we only saw those miserable movies by Wajda and Zanussi, and never saw the glorious surrealism of Wojceck Has. Svankmajer was the only representative of Czech surrealism with a rep in the West, and that really only after the beginning of the velvet revolution. Our sense of Eastern Europe has been tarnished by our artistic customs officers: galleries, museums, critics, distributors. The net begins to change this, perhaps, but only if we can reorganise our mindsets to grasp that there is something quite different, quite novel, quite surprising and, to use one of the conference's buzzwords, quite estranging about the emergent East-West relation.

Shulgin comes from a delirious legacy of anarchistic nihilist comedy, and authentic and living Dadaism, of which punk's po-faced situationism was only a pallid shadow. This kind of reverent play, this artful cunning, a million miles removed from the fatuous postmodernism of Koons and the neo-dada of the wealthy and fashionable galleries, kept on re-emerging in the oddest places. Tomas St. Auby presented his project for an International Parallel Union of Telecommunications (IPTU). The real International Union allocates the electromagnetic spectrum on an international basis in the interests of trade and governance. The IPTU sees this as Big Brother, and itself as Big Sister. In place of the promotion of consumerism, it calls for a general strike of consumption, seeing in the deaf-blind the new core of a new humanity. Taste, you see, has not much to do with it.

Marko Peljhan, arguing that Bosnia is currently the most surveyed patch of ground on the planet, proposed a counter-surveillance based on the military principles of the 'peace-keeping' force, the weak learning from the tools of the strong. Strategy, command, control and communications, surprise, initiative, mobility and the simple goals of an army: these would be the watchwords of an independent satellite communications network. Serious? Or a dark comedy? Both, especially in what, from the floor, was described as the commodification of space in the nation state.

Nationality too was a central factor in the new Europe. As your correspondent began to learn something of the difficulties and opportunities facing our colleagues, some of the mists began to lift. About the Soros Foundation, and the network of centres it has established across Eastern Europe, for example. George Soros, the billionaire trader, has set up centres where training and access, and the possibility of achieving substantial works, have become available to a large number of participants. But in certain cases, notably in Croatia, the centres have become the targets of verbal and occasionally physical attack. They have

been identified as invasive purveyors of ideologies and attitudes at odds with the nationalist ideologies of power blocs and political formations, leading youngsters away from traditional cultures and values.

You have to sense a certain ambiguity among even the beneficiaries of the Soros Foundation. Is it true that the West is driving a vast wedge of individualism and exploitation through the narrow wires of the internet? Eric Klutberg from Talinn raised these questions poignantly, critiquing the February 1995 Cyberspace Declaration of Independence penned by John Perry Barlow and published by the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Their attack on the US Telecommunications Reform Act in the name of a post-national, post-legal, post-political individualism was naive, simplistic, reactionary, even Cartesian, linked to gnostic hatred of the body, and profoundly anti-social. These values, too, have a claim on Eastern Europe, where freedom has become an almost theological category of thought, something perpetually demanded, yet never experienced.

Conflictual intellectual traditions demand new modes of cultural evolution. If 'communication' was, under the old regime, synonymous with propaganda, and the 'public sphere' with the state, what can be made of a new order in which the commercialisation of the media means that papers will not run stories critical of advertising or advertisers? Where the old state supports for artists have crumbled, but no new commercial infrastructure has come about? In which, after all, the state TV is often the best channel for the distribution of new work, despite everything that it has been associated with in the past?

What else has been lost? A number of speakers made pointed calls for a recognition of the changed experience and role of women in the old Comecon societies. Nina Czegledy noted the loss of women in public life; Mare Tralla noted the loss of an old, paternalist and tokenist but nonetheless effective Communist Party commitment to women's representation. Now, she identifies a 'culture of silence', in which representation in the political sense is replaced by representation as 'toys' and 'spinsters', leaving open only an ironic space for women's engagement in public culture. Without, as Nina Czegledy again put it, "a conceptual apparatus to name what I would now call gender politics".

Geert Lovink traced us a history of 'independent' and 'alternative' media, arguing that the former came to an end in 1989, when the samizdat logic (whereby cultural power was inversely proportional to economic scale) became a victim of its own success. 'Alternative' media was always a journalistic tag. In their place, he called for a tactical media, democratised, flexible, diffuse, semantically defined and independent of platform, demanding a kind of sharing of resources which neither corporate nor individualistic models can offer, and requiring a plurality of financial models. In the case of Bulgaria, investigated by several speakers, there exists a software infrastructure. But the authoritarianism associated with being Comecon's central economy for software development also led to a culture of hacking and copyright theft (not to mention viral programming). On the one hand, this allowed a thriving electronic music culture, seen as innocuous by the authorities. On the other, it leads Luchezar Boyadjiev to another Dadaist art-plot: why build new networks and online exhibition spaces when you can hack into the Virtual Louvre and hang your works there? Why defend human rights alone, when the internet is clearly the beginnings of a trades union movement for computers?

Speaker after speaker, especially on the second day, offered insights in the form of demonstrations, performances and screenings. Janos Sugar voiced a doubt many of us felt, and feel at such occasions: were we building a new East/West, rich/poor paradigm, an impoverished and stereotypical multiculturalism? The best argument against this doubt was the work that followed it. Ryszard Klusinski showed pages from a group project which included some of the most intelligent hypertext I have yet to see, a graphical animation stack of e.e. cummings' 'leaf' poem. Kathy Rae Huffman and Eva Wohlgemuth talked about their online dinner parties, which take the convivial space of women's talk and the form of the recipe book as cultural record to build new feminist technological connectivity. Representatives from www.opennet.org talked about the importance of Real Audio in the fight against state censorship of the airwaves, Lev

Manovitch described his Diamat Productions, with their Theory plug-ins, and Melentie Pandelovski presented an interactive net project based on the premise that Alexander the Great survived long enough to secure the bases for a unified Empire, neither Christian nor Judaic, East of the Bosphorus. The site raised questions of nationalism again, especially in the heated zone of dispute between Greece and Macedonia (FYROM): the map excludes both territories, and asks about a Europe whose hearty is neither Mediterranean nor Atlantic.

But perhaps of all the screened works, the one that made the most immediate and perhaps the most lasting impression was the talk by Enes Zlatar, who showed two pieces. The first was a banal piece of home video, two lads skiing down a street to the accompaniment of some dweebing pop tune. It was only as Zlatar explained that the music hid the silence, punctuated only by machine gun fire and cannon, of the height of the siege of Sarajevo, that the street should have been busy with shoppers but was covered with snow, and that skiing was an expression of longing for hills and pleasures put out of bounds by the war, that his exordium made sense: 'Video became our dream'. By contrast, we then watched a tape of a guy talking to camera, outdoors, about his desensitization to the suffering of the war; cut to scenes of hospital wards and fearful amputations; cut back to the monologist, now indicating a prone figure behind him in the middle distance of the shot: 'You know, I don't even know if that body is alive or dead, and I don't seem to care. And you know what's really strange', he added, with a pause both chilling and exhilarating, 'I feel GREAT!'. For Bosnians, even after the war, there are only three countries you can visit without a visa and all the hassle that goes with them. In this context, the internet takes on these dimensions of the siege: of the dream of escape and virtual travel, and as the site of an intensely local working-through of the particularities of a very specific culture—one from which the artists had already fled, leaving the people to make their own art.

Discussions raged, over drinks, in bars, through the night, at performances and at the special screening of work from Eastern Europe held as part of the festival at the Cornerhouse, Manchester. As Mike Stubbs from Hull Time Based Arts said on the second morning, "This is the first time I've woken up on a Sunday morning saying, Oh Good, the conference is still on". You felt that the moves between political platforms and computer platforms was moving the ground under your feet. Screened works like Czegledy's 'Tryptych' and Peter Forgacs' 'Wittgenstein Tractatus' would blow your socks off one way; the interplay between artistic ambition and pragmatic doggedness in the establishment of the Maribot women's festival would blast them back on again. Not a penny dropped without the floorboards being removed first. We have a huge amount to learn about the relations between nationalism and art, internet and communication, software theft and dadaism.

Perhaps nowhere more than in the UK, or more specifically in its little nations, do we have need of these experiences, where the ingrowing national ideologies of Little Englanders and the more kailyard wings of Scottish Nationalists have come so close to power. An early contribution from the floor suggested that the transnational, the parochial and the individualist need to be rethought in a new way: as the translocal. We have so much to learn. and we need to offer help gracefully. PDQ.

END NOTE: Edited proceedings from the LEAF97 conference are available at <http://www.personal.unet.com/~gas/leaf.htm>, complete with hotlinks to sites and contact addresses. The next major event discussing these issues will be Ostranenie, to be held in Bauhaus, Dessau. It is hoped that there will be a major Eastern European strand at ISEA98 in Liverpool and Manchester.

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