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The Material Versus the Virtual.

On Dialectics of Dalibor Martinis' Art

1.

Dalibor Martinis belongs to the first generation of European artists who employed electronic technologies in their creative activities. It was already a quarter of a century ago when Martinis produced his first video piece. Since then, the medium he had chosen has undergone a significant transformation. In its incubation period it was perceived as an important and helpful technological novelty, however aesthetically dependent and reliant on the existing arts, while broadening their scope of expression.

Video was useful to performers and happeners, as well as it was an ideal tool for conceptual activities. Besides, it was regarded as a media and artistic continuation of film. Nowadays it enjoys a status of an independent art discipline. In fact in comparison with the presently developing kinds of interactive multimedia art it seems already classic. After years of having functioned in disperse, in an aesthetic Diaspora, video art has finally found its stable place in the viewers' awareness, in the history of art, in the gallery and museum structure and in their collections. It can boast of its masters, its genres, styles and poetics.

2.

It was very early in his career when Dalibor Martinis specified his artistic interest. Hardly had he graduated a fine arts academy he turned his attention towards media art, towards video, which ever since has remained the area of his artistic activity. Moreover, the internal logic of his work has been subsequently, and not without a deep-grounded

reason, recognized as identical with media art characteristics, i.e. with the system of its essential features. This fact clearly shows to what an extent has Martinis decided to identify his artistic career with the media.

However, it is not solely the relation to the medium which is a constant quality in Dalibor Martinis' work. Almost from its very beginning a characteristic internal tension could have been sensed, a dual conflict has marked the works' structure. At the beginning the opposition was of formal and semantic nature. The central element organizing his videotapes' structure, as well as his video installations, was a pair of contradictory view-points (e.g. in *VIEW TO ANOTHER VIEW*, 1986), opposing discourses (*BLACK AND WHITE*, 1985), or a collision of construction and narration (*SUPPER AT LAST*, 1990-92). A seemingly trivial concept of the presence of the sign at the absence of the object turned out to be an interesting basis of the structure and conflict of some works (*TAVOLA CALDA*, 1987, or aforementioned *SUPPER AT LAST*). The formal dualism was rather frequently linked to and underlined by a conflict man - woman relation as in *CHANOYU* (1983) or in *BLACK AND WHITE* (Dalibor's collaboration with Sanja Ivekovic on some of the tapes was undoubtedly a conductive factor here). The relation is rooted in the universal opposition of male and female elements and however miscellaneously verbalized (for instance in the yin-yang opposition); it forms a multi-periodic (multi)cultural pattern and a basis for various worldview constructions. It was actually the above-mentioned opposition that was of particular interest to the artist.

Nevertheless, the prevalent opposition which for many years has built the character of Dalibor Martinis' work and which also unites both mentioned aporetic structures (the formal and semantic one) was the antinomy of form and medium. Martinis has begun his artistic dialogue with video in the epoch when analytical and conceptual tendencies were dominating in the European art. Due to these circumstances Dalibor concerned himself with the technological aspect of this kind of art and what is more, his imagination and his art gained a foundation for its dialogue-like and dualistic structures. Narrations undertaken by Martinis always referred equally well to the context in which they developed. In other words, they conversed with the medium itself. Thus, the meta-artistic discourse is undertaken as a parallel to the artistic one.

3.

In recent years, however, one can observe a new phenomenon, a new quality arise. A progressing process of overcoming and nullifying the oppositions, which until recently were fundamental for Dalibor's works is appearing. The process does not lead to the abolishment of the structural variety and complexity of the works. On the contrary, we can see at present the antagonistic relation of a work's elements or aspects yield to their co-existence. In this new, appearing paradigm, the relation between the material and the virtual aspect of the piece is gaining ground and taking up the position in the center.

Numerous excellent examples of the new Martinis' stand are shown at the "Observatorium" exhibition. Installations presented in its scope represent various types of relations between the material and the virtual. Put together they create a paradigm of co-existence. The exhibition actually presents the possible forms the meeting of the two spheres. In actual fact, the variety of forms the virtual can take: light, sound or/and image (e.g. sound installation *STORMTELLERS*, 1997), or presumably a narrative or a presented world, is by no means less numerous than the variety of forms of the material. Narration, by the way, spreads in Martinis' work beyond the regions planned for it. It happens that it trespasses the borders of the piece's structure.

Martinis' art addresses a belief that the story has not to be told even if we want it to appear in the artistic communication discourse. We can refer to stories each of the viewers carries inside of her/him, and that is what Martinis does. In such a case, a work of art functions as a factor liberating stories, it provokes their placement in the process of artistic communication. At the same time it is one of the ways of neutralizing the conflict-bearing contradiction between the material and the virtual aspect of a work of art, the latter being represented here by the story. Narration is perceived as a physical component of a work of art and it is incorporated into its structure in a way similar to and governed by the same rules as its material elements.

An illustrative example of this form of co-existence of material and virtual elements in the structure of a piece is the installation entitled *ECLIPSE OF THE MOON* (1997). Here, as well as in many other Martinis' works, both spheres are combined in a dynamic relationship heading towards the state of equilibrium. Time and again the one or the

other aspect gains over and influences decisively the form of the whole, but anyway each of those states is solely a transitional one and in some time it yields to another one, it eventually and inevitably recedes into a flow of incoming transformations.

Searching for and establishing a temporary and unstable equilibrium has become the main area of Dalibor Martinis' artistic experiments. A game between the material and virtual of a piece and of art itself has been with grandeur and in a virtuoso way realized in CIRCLES BETWEEN SURFACES (1994-95). The narration here, apparently belonging completely to the virtual sphere, reveals its deep dependence from the material, the physical sphere of the work, but to a careful viewer it discloses its true character, that it is spread between the two spheres. The piece as a whole, in its two-dimensionality (material-virtual), becomes in this case a narration itself, and simultaneously it reveals the materiality of the virtual spheres and the virtuality of matter.

That is how the term "game" introduced above turns out to be the basic structural category of the latest phase of Dalibor Martinis' oeuvre. The game takes place between the material and the virtual, between the space and time, the narration and its frames, the past (tradition) and the present, the artwork and its recipient.

4.

In the scope of the creative strategy shaped in the way described in the previous paragraphs, the recipient is granted a specific and responsible position. Being a carrier of the stories, which are actualized and incorporated in the piece's structure and with the mediative role of the work of art, s/he becomes at the same time a hero of the narrative, a figure spoken by the story. S/he becomes an observation object for her/himself. It applies to the installation ECLIPSE, discussed above. It is even more visible in the installation COMA (1997), where the viewer is provoked to interfere and it is not possible that s/he does not see her/his presence in the image. The button pressed by her/him is located in this way that the shadow of her/his hand inevitably appears as a part of the image.

In a lot of other works projectors are placed so that the receiver cannot avoid his unintentional inference – and thus s/he becomes a work's component, an object and subject of observation.

A desire to include the recipient into the work's structure was in a way ever-present in Dalibor Martinis' work, including the pieces prior to his entering the realm of media art. The installation MODUL N&Z from 1969 may serve as an example here. In this work the viewers' movements have been incorporated into their reception experience as their indispensable element. The beginning of the very consistent and visible entangling of the viewer in the video installation structure, in my opinion, can be traced down to the project ON YOUR OWN (1990).

Speaking about the viewer's presence in the piece structure, it should be underlined that the artist himself makes his position in the work no less visible. A lot of his video works take a form (or structure) of performance, and numerous tapes and installations bear trace of material artist's presence. Juxtaposing those two strategies - the one which emphasizes the author's presence and the other which includes the viewer in the frame of the work may serve for another evidence of Martinis' tendency to transform the structure antinomy into the poetics of co-existence, which has been so visibly present in the installation COMA, discussed above.

This way of viewer treatment and her/his new position in the structure of artistic communication is also a result of influence of the concept of interactivity, which presently transforms (multi)media art, on the definition and the process of reception of the work. Martinis approaches interactivity with some caution and reticence, but he does not reject it completely. It is not his artistic activities' objective, but it becomes their structural aspect and component. It helps to develop the strategy of an artist who wishes the viewer took the challenge as a task for her/himself. Activity on the part of the viewer becomes a source of meaning, in which s/he is entangled and of which it turns to be a part of. The viewer can no longer perceive her/himself apart from the experienced artwork.

There exists another aspect of the process, in the scope of which the viewer participates in the structure of the work observed. It should be pointed out that when a part of a person becomes a part of the image at the same moment a part of the image becomes the viewer, and her/his body becomes a screen. This strategy is a fragment of the image analysis carried out in Martinis' oeuvre. As a result the image is liberated from the surface. The installation PRISM (1996) is another example of this phenomenon. It reveals the materiality of image (and the material dimension of virtuality) as well as makes us aware in this way that the consequence of the above mentioned fact is the self-sufficiency, the autonomous being of the image, which becomes its own base, its own screen.

5.

There exist many more problems evoked by Dalibor Martinis' work, their process-like nature, ironic discourses, and skepticism to cite just a few issues deserving a close analysis. Symbolic aspects and tendency to address some subjects (e.g. journey) or elements (e.g. water) seem exceptionally important, too. The number of those issues and their scope far exceeds the scope of this essay. I mention them hoping that I will have an opportunity in the future to discuss them in detail. To sum up, it should be restated however that undoubtedly Martinis' oeuvre makes up one of the most interesting chapters of the world media art history.

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