BridA: Homo Faber Becomes Homo Ludens

The term 'Homo faber' is used in anthropology to describe mankind as a living being, which uses tools to change its environment. Today, we are surrounded by a lot of devices, instruments or apparatuses to exert influence on our surrounding. Most of these tools are designed to make us more productive. Only some of them fall in the category of play or celebration. Vilém Flusser came up with the idea that it might be possible for mankind to become what he called 'Homo ludens': Man the Player.

In this text, projects of the art collective BridA (Sendi Mango, Jurij Pavlica and Tom Kerševan) will be explored with regard to Flusser's utopia of a telematic society, in which mankind will primarily be playing or even be celebrating, since everybody will be empowered to do so by a new imagination. The following quote by Flusser gives a broader view on his philosophy and shows the potential of BridA's computational artifacts:

> First, man took a step back from his life-world, to imagine it. Then, man stepped back from the imagination, to describe it. Then, man took a step back from the linear, written critique, to analyze it. And finally, owing to a new imagination, man projected synthetic images out of analysis.[1]

This is the short version of how Homo faber becomes Homo ludens. The first sentence points at a characteristic that all pictures have in common. This is even true for the 36,000-year-old mystical pictures of the – meanwhile extinct – woolly rhinoceroses on the walls of the Chauvet cave in France, because they were designed to be viewed from a few steps back. This might seem trivial, but the stepping back also involves the process of "somehow simultaneously retreat[ing] into oneself."[2] To distance oneself from the objective world by producing images means to gain subjectivity, no matter what the pictures express or stand for.

Later, images were critiqued in linear writing, since the structure of books became the model for thinking. The concept of history evolved to propose linear developments, which begin, continue and end eventually. It has been stated that this approach, this linear, purposeful way of thinking, bears some problematic features. Nevertheless: "To write meant, in the past, to render opaque images transparent for the world."[3]

In the tradition of this linear way of thinking, it might be stated that the visual endeavor, which may be called 'likeliness', found its completion in Renaissance painting, although this optical enterprise has been criticized for many reasons. One of them is that "they [pictures] present themselves before the objects that they should be representing."[4] This argument plays a central role in the Christian tradition of casting doubt on pictures, called iconoclasm, which is opposed to idolatry.

The analytic process took its path and as a result synthetic images evolve, which are based on calculation. At this stage calculated images produced by BridA gain importance.

---

[1] Vilém Flusser: *Writings*; Editor: Andreas Ströhl; Translated by Erik Eisel; Electronic Mediations, volume 6 (Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p.116
[2] ibid. p.111
[3] ibid. p.69
[4] ibid. p.111

Fig.1: BridA: *Trackeds 1.0*, 2009

The concept of BridA's *Trackeds 1.0* is to place a camera at a high position and monitor how people or vehicles – like motorbikes, cars or trucks – move about. Those movements are detected and marked by software so that the spectator of the computed animation can see blue or yellow dots, which are connected by bowed, dynamic lines, floating on a screen. At first glance, one expects this system to be a device, which is recording movement to analyze and optimize traffic streams.

Since the cityscapes transformed by BridA are taken from a bird's eye view, they are not like the optical impressions we experience when we encounter individuals in real life. Immediately, those aerial points of views remind us of some omniscient vantage point. God sees everything from above. In medieval times the lords of the castle kept eye on the country to control it. Today armed military drones are scanning parts of the world. In recent 3D-movies aerial views are used to jack up the amount of adrenaline in the bloodstream of the spectators. The images produced by BridA differ: They do not show airstrikes or special effects. They are rather connected to animations Harun Farocki presented in the video installation *Deep Play* in 2007.
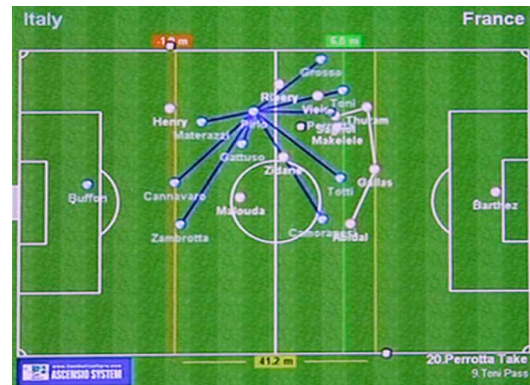

Fig.2 and 3: Harun Farocki: *Deep Play*, 2007

Farocki showed the final of the FIFA World Championship in 2006 on 12 monitors. One of them shows close-ups of soccer stars (Fig.2). Another is focused on either one of the coaches and others are showing images taken from surveillance cameras. One of the screens shows how some experts produce a protocol of the game.

Other animations look like those BridA is presenting. One of them (Fig.3) shows the white lines of a soccer field on a green background. Eleven dots stand for the French team and the others represent the Italian players. All the spots float on the stable image. If the ball is in the game and a French player controls it, blue lines connect the players like a star. Those lines show the

opportunities the players have to pass the ball on to their teammates. White lines connect a couple of dots – members of the Italian team – so they form an imaginary defense line. These two-dimensional constructs float around the field and switch structure if the other team gains possession of the ball. The beauty of bodily movement we usually adore on TV is translated into a kind of dance choreography.

The observer is made to see the final through the eyes of an expert. More than that, one may also watch what experts are doing to analyze the interplay of the competitors and to make it more 'functional'. In the context of the art world the installation *Deep Play* becomes an artwork about analyzing or analytics. Farocki shows images of optimization, to make us think about them.

BridA uses surveillance and optimizing software to a different end than those experts who create protocols and statistics of a professional soccer game. BridA superimposes their analytical computational animation on top of stills of intersections. Two systems of graphs move around the plain surface. Those movements are even subject to 'sonification': The algorithms are transformed into a vivid soundscape. The calculation is not performed to gain anything. Dynamic data is celebrated. Thus, BridA is taking the notion of playing one step further.

> [O]nly when one produces images of calculations instead of facts (it does not matter how "abstract" the facts) can "pure aesthetics" (the joy of playing with "pure forms") find its true expression; only then can *Homo ludens* replace *Homo faber*.[5]

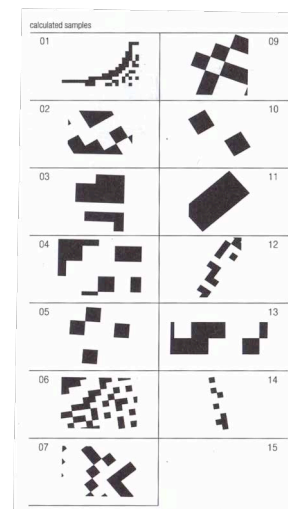Fig.4: BridA: *The City Of Ljubljana*, 2010   Fig.5: Projected shapes

BirdA's project *Modux Datascapes* is a good example for what is meant by playing with pure forms in a celebratory manner. They threw different data sets into an environment of purposeless play. In the case of the painting *The City Of Ljubljana* (Fig.4) they fed the following factors into a calculating system: "date and time of data collection; surface of the city; population location coordinates; average temperature (high values); average temperature (low values); average of raining days; number of criminal acts; city budget".[6] A computer program converted this data into a couple of sets of colored shapes. The resulting schemata (Fig.5) were projected on a white picture plane in a gallery; the visitors of the exhibition fixed those shapes by rolling out fresh paint.

---

[5] ibid. p.116
[6] BridA: *Zamenjau Barvo! Change The Color!* Editor: Božidar Zrinski (Ljubljana: Matformat, 2011) p.38

Thus, the gallery space was transformed into a studio. The artists set up the procedure, while the visitors became part of the artwork.

Those who look at the paintings will not be able to recognize what they see no matter how familiar they might be with Ljubljana because the inner logic of the image is not analogous to the visual perception expected if one 'steps back' and takes a look at picturesque Ljubljana. The image does not show the conventional, iconic features of any anticipated scene. The basis for the visual constructs called *Modux Datascapes* are not light beams, which follow the laws of physical optics. Another logic, a creative principle other than likeliness, is introduced: High-tech environments are used as a basis for expanding and amplifying imagination. Homo ludens uses all kinds of information and computational possibilities to develop new, freely programed images or imaginations. The artist is not the genius who is inspired or enlightened by some spirit anymore.

If BridA's visual concepts and ideas are compared to the animation that visualizes the strategy of the soccer teams, the difference between playing and celebration becomes obvious. Soccer games have become part of the leisure industry. Just like yoga, vacation or even therapy, this type of leisure is built into the economic engine of industrialized societies. According to Flusser, people take a break: They may relax to be more 'productive'.[7]

BridA demonstrates how the momentum of leisure can be built into everyday life, including work. They show how a "leisurely life of contemplation and celebration"[8] may be created. They do not calculate to gain advantages. The phenomenon of calculating images is reflected in BridA's way of thinking.

High-tech environments are made palpable in many ways by BridA. *Do it yourself!*[9] is another one of their projects that involves audience participation. Visitors are asked to follow orders that are prerecorded. The participants start painting colored squares from the left to right side of the picture plane. So, they start in the upper right corner, pick another color, leave a square blank, pick another color, start another row, and so on. This process may be seen as an equivalent of what a computer screen does at an incredibly amazing speed. In this sense BridA is downgrading technology. The images are much smaller; they consist of fewer spots than pictures on a computer or television screen. It is made clear that popular high-tech devices are able to produce images much faster than humans.

The visitors, who follow the orders, symbolically plunge into the computational process of creating an image. Thus, they are able to experience structural differences between human thought and digital media. Participants constantly felt the need to discuss their feelings while this procedure was put into practice. People were not standing in front of great works of art quietly. Instead, they were debating their personal experiences and entering "dialogical life."[10]

BridA's programs or procedures form a model. They produce their own software, which is not interpreting visuality according to the regular, functional, bureaucrat logic. They cast a personal, subjective sight on imagination. BridA interprets by programming or by setting up procedures: For Homo ludens it is important to create their 'own programs', this goes along with a dispossession of the senders who own the software, set the rules. "Thus, telematization would be a technique for

---

[7] See: Vilém Flusser: *Writings*; p.167
[8] See: ibid. p.XIV
[9] See: BridA: *Zamenjau Barvo! Change The Color!* pp.30-33
[10] Vilém Flusser: *Writings*; p.171

tearing the programs from the hands of the senders, to make them the property of all participants."[11]

Participants of the *Do it Yourself!* scheme discussed how they might become pawns in the new game of digitalization. This is the first step to prohibit the possibility that everybody becomes a pawn controlled by a sender, who might be media experts or politicians. BridA takes part in the "socialization of imperialistic programs"[12]: To own a program signifies 'dispossession' in this context.

A project, which makes this attitude explicitly, is *Trackeds Parliament*[13]: One of three projections show how many members of the Slovenian parliament were present the day a discussion about insulation of Slovenian buildings took place in 2010. Another projection documents how badly the parliament building was insulated. The third and most interesting projection shows the TV broadcast of the debate. This broadcast, produced for politicians to send out their messages and control public opinion, is combined with a graph of the speakers' stress level, which is detected by software that takes the broadcasted sounds and pictures as a basis. The pyramid of control is turned upside-down: By reprogramming BridA transforms the protagonists of the state into subjects of control. By running their 'own program' they make us think about contemporary communication techniques.

Their latest project is called *SpreadKOM*. It also focuses on communication. About fifteen devices, which function as nodes of a network, are set up in a forest. They are equipped with microphones and powered either by water or the sun. These autonomous systems are able to register a certain sound frequency, which can be produced by a bird singing or somebody whistling. The devices react to the signal and send out sound waves, which may trigger other systems and so on. That way, a sound collage is created, which can be experienced in physical space. People who walk into the soundscape can even navigate by listening. Everybody may take it as a game, which nobody can win and anybody can contemplate or celebrate. Homo faber may become Homo ludens: BridA's projects are not protuberances of a telematic society but artifacts produced to promote self-reflective reasoning in a digitalized world.

Gerald Geilert, October 30th 2015

---

[11] ibid. p.170
[12] ibid.
[13] See: BridA: *Zamenjau Barvo! Change The Color!* pp.54-57

Table of Figures