

Re-subjectivity: Media Art as a Practice of Identity

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Abstract—This article focuses on media art (and specifically - virtual reality) as a powerful tool which allows transforming social agenda into personal meaning for a participating viewer. VR has recently become an intriguing medium which makes one feel present in the artistic "text"; to maximize the effect of immersion many VR projects give the viewer an opportunity to be not just a witness of a scene, but a participant, a one who takes action influencing the course of the narrative. Thus, we argue that VR should be analyzed as "machine" to gather new experiences and "melt" the boundaries of subjectivity including illusion of stability of both one's body and Weltbild. In virtual reality a user is able to experience the new subjectivity, being-with-the-Other, or – to a certain extent – being the Other. When such "meetings" take place in a safe space of aesthetic experience a spectator can literally take part in these scenarios and experience the affects which would be unimaginable in everyday life, expand his own boundaries of subjectivity and go beyond the limits of an egocentric position.

Keywords—*virtual reality; media art; subjectivity; immersion; "crisis" of the Cartesian subject; the Other*

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently the discourse on the concept of subjectivity has been undergoing an exciting transformation which in turn significantly affects contemporary artistic practices.

Such transformation is fraught with the critical rethinking of the classic Cartesian-kantian paradigm of the subject in the twentieth century: first Freud and Lacan demonstrate the fails in a concept of autonomy and sovereignty of a Mind; then follows a process of rethinking of an imaginary borderline separating a subject from material objects, Bergson, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty underline that any experience (and consequently any idea we drive from it) is embedded in a body belonging to the world of objects; in the 1960-s the dimension of a language is added, Deleuze, Derrida, Barthes and Foucault point out the decentered, fluctuating nature of a subject strongly affected by narratives and significations; the feminist and post-colonial thinkers of today underline the social aspect of subjectivity, one's representation in a net of discourses and one's activity about it.

Oleg Matveichev has strikingly commented that the concepts of the subject and the object are – "rubrics" of the new European metaphysics: "Exactly in the Modern age the

question 'What is human?' was answered: 'It is a subject'. And by the "subject" a certain metaphysical (ontological, epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) structure was meant. Ontological in the first place" [1]. After all, as was rightly noted by A.S. Kolesnikov, in his fundamental affirmation "cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore, I exist") René Descartes puts the emphasis on "sum", i.e. on the principle of being [2]. Contemplating this, Heidegger writes: "The metaphysics of the Modern age begins with the fact – that is its essence – that it is looking for the undoubted, reliable, it is looking for credibility. According to Descartes, it has to be "firmum et mansurum quid stabilire", that is, to be established, be caused to stop, something fixed and enduring" [3]. Thus the subject becomes such an "unquestionable", "credible" category, and the subject in metaphysics of the Modern age is only the human surrounded by the objects he conceives. In fact, one of the revolutions in the latest European thought could, tentatively speaking, be reduced to the phrase: "The subject is not only a person" – that is, of course, only the beginning of a long line of reasoning, which is now emerging within "new ontologies" (e.g., "flat" ontology).

However, in this paper we do not aim to reconstruct the historiography of the interpretation of the concept of "subject", we have a different task – namely, to trace how the "crisis" of the Cartesian subject, the fundamental revision of this paradigm is reflected in contemporary artistic practices.

Already in the twentieth century, non-classical philosophical anthropology – in dispute with classical anthropology – postulates that a person does not possess a clearly fixed essence, there is no once and for all defined "what" (universal essence, invariant "core"). It views a person as a "dreaming self" (Boroday), as a result of their own belief, not as a prolonged and stable reality, but as a situational assembly. For example, R. Braidotti, developing the Deleuzian concept of "nomadic singularity" (with which G. Deleuze replaces the classic concept of the subject) notes: "The nomad does not stand for homelessness or compulsive displacement: it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity. It expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes without essential unity" [4].

Not only the subject, but also its derivative – subjectivity¹ – is now thought of as something temporal, situational, something that is actualized through communication and representation. Noting that any act of speaking involves not only information exchange but also positioning: a speaker places himself in a certain perspective of a discourse field and through his speech he indicates the place of a listener one is addressing to, the act of speech is an act of power forcing both the speaker and the listener into certain roles, formatting their subjectivity, every time anew when the given situation gets reassembled.

At the same time, the boundaries of subjectivity are being blurred – largely due to modern technologies, which are no longer the privilege of the chosen elites. Thanks to the activity of biohacker artists, more and more people have access to "open source genetics" (systems like CRISPR/Cas9) and are able (at least able to try) to edit their genome. In addition, the bionic technologies are actively developing, expanding the idea of sensuality – the new sensations of the body and its functions, the shared sensuality (as in one of the projects of the artist Stelarc, in which he wondered about the privacy of the senses), the ability of new bodies to navigate the world in a new way (for example, Neil Harbisson, artist and cyborg activist, was able to "hear" color by means of a special antenna implanted into his skull). Finally, the technologies of augmented and virtual reality (VR), which are now actively used by artists to create their works, continue to develop.

The focus of our research is on virtual reality – because it is in the space of VR that the traditional boundaries of subjectivity "melt", and even the illusion of stability of our body can be destroyed. It is clearly seen in the following art projects: the projects of the laboratory BeAnotherLab, interdisciplinary research group of the University of Barcelona, a group from Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, as well as the collaboration project of Thomas Metzinger and Olaf Blanke. More and more artists are entering the VR universe. Drawing on the works by AES+F, Marina Abramović, Anisha Kapoor, Nonny de la Peña and other authors, we will trace the relationship between the displaced boundaries of subjectivity and the transformation of aesthetic experience today.

II. VIRTUAL REALITY AS A TECHNOLOGY FOR "ASSEMBLING" SUBJECTIVITY

Today, many people call VR technology an "empathy machine" (e.g. Robert Hassan in his article *Digitality, Virtual Reality and The 'Empathy Machine'* (2019)) because it is in the space of virtual reality that the user is able to experience a new subjectivity, being-with-Another or – to a certain extent – being Another. For example, in 2015 J. Bailenson and his colleagues at Stanford University created a slaughterhouse simulation so that the viewer wearing a virtual reality helmet could literally find themselves "in the

skin" of an animal intended for slaughter. In 2018 Bailenson in his book *Experience on Demand*, which also contains the description of the project, quotes one of the test subjects who noted: "I truly felt like I was going to the slaughterhouse ... and felt sad that as a cow I was going to die." According to Bailenson, many of those who went through this "on-demand experience" turned to eating less meat [5]. Another interesting example of a "sojourn" in someone else's body is represented in the experiment conducted by the interdisciplinary group of students BeAnotherLab at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. The project is titled *The Machine To Be Another*. The essence of the project is as follows: two participants (a man and a woman) put on virtual reality glasses and begin to see what the other sees. For instance, the man sees the woman's hands as his own. In order to enhance the effect of the illusion, the participants of the experiment are asked to simultaneously perform the same movements with their hands and feet.

BeAnotherLab is not the first team of researchers to engage in such experiments. In addition to them, there is a group from Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Event Lab from Barcelona (their current project is *Moments in Time in Immersive Virtual Environments*, dedicated to the reconstruction of events from the past), as well as projects by Thomas Metzinger and Olaf Blanke, who together with cognitive scientists Bigna Lenggenhager and Tej Teddy created a VR system designed to cause people to experience being outside their bodies, destroying the illusion of stability of our body model. In their research Metzinger and Blanke based on the following assumptions: we live "inside" not only our ideas about the world, but also inside the models of our bodies, minds, and our "self". These models, like all others, are subject to manipulation and transformation, they are not constant. By receiving new bodily experiences, we gain new experiences of subjectivity or "expand" the existing ones.

From 2010 to 2015 two more researchers – Maria Sanchez-Vives and Mel Slater – worked with Metzinger and Blanke on the project *Virtual Incarnation and Robotic Reincarnation* (the project was aimed at giving the viewer the experience of "incarnation" in another body). At the moment, Maria Sanchez-Vives together with other researchers from the University of Barcelona are developing a virtual reality project in which perpetrators of violent crimes in the family get the opportunity to find themselves in their victims' place.

Many researchers and activists are attracted to VR as a "machine for empathy" because it gives the opportunity to reframe their own ideas about the world, the system of values, etc. – since often it is difficult for us to relate ourselves to different people and events that have never happened to us. What are the values of the girl who is forced to flee Syria? This could be learned from watching the VR film *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015). The film about the struggle of Syrian refugees was created by the team of Chris Milk and Gabo Arora in partnership with the United Nations. Thanks to the use of a large number of cameras that were shooting in all directions, the viewer has the opportunity to watch the film from any angle. It is as if the viewer is inside the story,

¹ In this article we consider subjectivity as an expression of a person's (thinking subject's) ideas about the world, their point of view, feelings, beliefs, and desires / according to Bowie, Andrew (1990). *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

not simply watching what is happening in the "frame", as if looking in the "window to the world", but crossing the plane of the frame and being inside the story, inside the "world". M. Cousins in his book *The Story of Looking* describes this experience: "Our senses tell us that we are there in ways no other art form or mode of journalism has previously made possible" [6]. In 2017 at the Venice Film Festival another film by Arora was presented, which he shot together with Ari Palitz: *A Final Farewell*. The film is a virtual reality tour of the gas chambers of Majdanek. The viewer is accompanied by a living witness of the Holocaust who addresses him directly, which creates a sense of connection, a private conversation.

The works of "immersive journalism" by the team of Nonny de la Peña are constructed in a slightly different way. In la Peña's works the user is able to immerse themselves in the space of a tense socio-economic situation (*Hunger in Los Angeles*, 2013), a military conflict (*Project Syria*, 2014), a conflict of values and ideologies (*Out of Exile*, 2017). The viewer here, however, is invisible as situations unfold without his participation. Therefore virtual reality becomes a powerful tool, but yet it does not imply an active response of the spectator, his actions in the VR space. In order to achieve the maximum effect, it is necessary to involve the mechanisms of response, to give the viewer the opportunity to be not just a witness of a scene, a participant, an actor actively influencing the course of the narrative – this is the kind of experience we drive from interactive VR-projects, first of all videogames where one is literally walking in someone else's shoes and making decisions which may alter not only his perception of self but also reconfigure his ideas of the order of things in common reality.

III. VR TECHNOLOGIES IN ART: TRANSFORMATION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Recently, more and more artists have turned to the VR medium. From a segment, "niche" tool particular to the gaming industry, VR is gradually transforming into a tool that gives artists new opportunities of self-expression. For example, Anish Kapoor, famous for his huge multi-ton objects (like the installation *My Red Homeland*), in 2018 created an even larger installation – now in the space of virtual reality. His project *Into Yourself, Fall* allows the viewer to take a fresh look at the dichotomy of micro- and macrocosm. Despite the fact that the work does not involve the viewer's active participation, it nevertheless makes a strong impression, because the artist uses the mechanics of "falling" (which is often played out in VR projects, especially those that relate to the entertainment industry). However, in this case, the "fall" is not a self-sufficient amusement, it is a tool allowing the artist to speak in a new way on the topics of interest to him – on the difference between the existent and non-existent (but given to us in sensations), about the internal and external. The perception of the spectator, who falls into "themselves" not in a metaphorical, figurative sense, but quite literally, is also changing – this might provoke in him a new experience of his own physicality.

In a similar vein, the logic of Marina Abramović's VR project *Immersion* unfolds. The project itself is devoted to reflection on the human impact on the environment, however within its framework the artist explores some other issues: for example, whether the virtual "presence" of the artist can be as "effective" in terms of the "energy exchange" between the artist and the viewer as the real one. Abramović is known for her "heroic" performances, in which she struggles her own pain, fear, and discomfort. However, in the framework of the medium that is new for her she rather "steps aside" and the viewer becomes the new hero – it is for him (each of the many spectators to whom the virtual avatar of the artist addresses), ultimately, to decide whether the world of the future is to survive or not. The mechanism of positioning in an act of speech is all too clear in this case: Abramović is calling upon us, placing one in the circumstances where we should feel a strong desire to make an impact... and walk away with it. This VR-video is not interactive, one can first see the ice peaks melt and fall into water, feel the water level rising at his feet, then a viewer gets into a dark room with a cube full of water and sees a figure if Abramović nearly drowning. It activates our empathy and a wish to do something – but in this project one can not interact with the environment, one can only watch. Perhaps the artist's idea was to make the spectator "wake up" and make some change in real life (not in imaginary space of VR), however, on the other hand this project has become a striking metaphor of a "useless" subjectivity of today's person who is full of compassion but lacks power.

A completely different approach to the problem of the hero could be seen in the works by Tsai Ming-liang. His project for VR, the film *The Deserted* (2017), which was shown at the Venice film festival in 2017, does not imply any involvement on the part of the viewer in the narrative. The viewer is present in the installation as a Ghost (the original title of the film refers to the story of the abandoned Lan Re Temple inhabited by ghosts and spirits) – one can only contemplate, but is not able to act. The story unfolds without him, and he is "stuck" in a space from where there is no escape – except that one can remove the helmet and refuse to participate in the project at all. Thus Tsai plays on a specific aesthetic experience of many VR works that are addressed to the viewer, designed for his presence and his emotional complicity (as it is with the works of de la Peña or Arora). In Tsai's work, the viewer soon finds themselves in the role of peeping Tom; this was exactly what the director intended, inspired by a desire to share the experience of fantastic meta-presence.

Now let us consider an example of VR-installation which does not limit the viewer in motion and even allows them to look "inside" oneself. In 2017 Wesley Allsbrook and her team created an animated film *Dear Angelica* (the third film from Oculus Story Studio; prior to this Oculus created a film about the life of the hedgehog *Henry* and the film *Lost*). *Dear Angelica* is a virtual installation, completely created in the VR space for playback on VR devices. The viewer seems to be "inside" the virtual illustrations, at any time one can put the record on pause and scrutinize the drawings from all angles, so that they rather look like virtual sculptures. Such

"closeness" of the image (which you could literally go into!) enhances the sense of involvement with characters and events. What is also interesting in this work is that the viewers themselves may choose the closeness of shot, for example, by coming closer to the characters or distancing from them.

It has to be said that it is VR's quality of interactivity that interests many contemporary artists today who build VR-spaces with the option of "feedback" or in some other way seeking to immerse the viewer even more into the virtual world. The artist might put the viewer in such conditions so that he would need to go somewhere, manipulate objects, say some phrases. For example, the authors of the project *Psychosis* which was shown in 2018 in the MARS art centre – the group "AES+F" – involve not only audiovisual material, but also the body of the viewer: he or she is invited to sit in a wheelchair and "roll" it, touching the cold surface of metal wheels. Torso, legs, and chair are represented in the space of VR installation, which only enhances the effect of immersion in the visual narrative, this virtual corporeality makes pictures of delirium passing before the eyes look strikingly real and frightening – unlike Nonny de la Peña the artists make one fully engaged in a horror of another (psychically and physically disabled).

Even further goes Alejandro González Iñárritu, the author of the already famous short film *Flesh and Sand* (*Carne y Arena*, 2017), which is currently on display in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (first, a fragment of the project was shown in Cannes). The virtual installation is dedicated to the life of illegal migrants, and the viewers are provided with a heavy backpack, carrying which they must travel in a specially designed space. The project was awarded a special prize for the experiment with form and the promise of a new experience of cinematic perception (the experience of history in a space free from the boundaries of frame, the stimulation of sensory knowledge). Unlike *Dear Angelica*, which required only a VR helmet to be perceived, as well as the works that operate minimal props (for example, a wheelchair for *Psychosis*), Iñárritu's installation involves space, objects and people, which, of course, only enhances the immersive experience. The project has a subtitle: "Virtually present, Physically invisible", and it is not entirely clear who are the subjects in question – the audience, whose bodies do not receive representation in the installation space, or the migrants, whose real stories the director managed to recreate by means of virtual reality.

Another fascinating example of an interactive VR installation was demonstrated at the Venice Film Festival in 2017. The creators of this project, Laurie Anderson and Huang Jianxin, were awarded the Best VR Experience prize. The project is called *La Camera Insabbiata* and represents a specially designed space where the viewers might create live sculptures with the sound of their own voices, draw pictures with the help of flapping hands, observe the growth of the tree of life and fly over the maze of rooms. Later, Laurie Anderson and Huang Jianxin began work on the project *On the Moon* (2019), dedicated to the Apollo 11 moon landing 50th anniversary. In this project, the mechanics of feedback are implemented to a lesser extent, it is rather of a cognitive

interest: the viewer can tread on the minutely recreated surface of the satellite having a unique not-on-the-Earth experience.

Another author who experiments not only with speech, but also with complex feedback algorithms in VR is Louise Clemann, the Creator of the project *Aporia* demonstrated in 2019 in MAMM. In her VR installation Clemann provides an opportunity for the viewer to "communicate" with three robots on topics related to the future of artificial intelligence. The installation provokes reflection on what "life" is and whether it must necessarily be carbon-based. Interestingly, the robots address not only the viewer, but also each other, they are able to make jokes and even lie. The viewer may ignore their questions, and then the robots will conduct the conversation among themselves, recognizing the reluctance to communicate demonstrated by the viewer, and taking it into account. This suggests a parallel with the real situation in the field of AI and robotics, the development of which is currently intensifying (regardless of our desire).

IV. CONCLUSION

Psychology of perception does not cease to underline that any perception is also an act of intellection: we experience things through the prepared frames and while gaining new sensual data we shape these frames of both perception and cognition. Contemplating the evolution of art in the XX century we can clearly identify a piece of art not only as an esthetic object but also as an act of communication, a situation of a speech (in Modern art) of a situation of a dialog (in Contemporary art). A viewer is called upon, he gets involved in a problem artist is dealing with, he is encouraged or criticized, he is supposed to act in return – such kind of communication became the means of producing one's subjectivity.

F. Gyronok ironically calls subjectivity "the real source of chaos": "...Subjectivity is not what the subject does. To be subjective is to be exposed to the forces of the imaginary. To be exposed is to change consciousness, to create a middle ground in it. For the middle ground to appear, you need to populate the world with ghosts, that is, things that do not exist, but that appear if they are treated as something really existing. <...> In the world... there are, on the one hand, bodies and forces, and on the other – subjectivity and will. And the subject exists not because there are bodies, but because there is subjectivity, in which the will to objectivity establishes the subject" [7]. However the bodies should not be neglected, it is the full-sensual experience we find in VR that enhances one's empathy and expands the limits of his modes of behavior and Weltbild.

Avant-garde art has long been trying to break the glass wall between a viewer and a masterpiece, to pull one into a semiotic field and teach him how to act inside it, to invoke one's creativity. Installations and environments have played important role in this process, offering a new, immersive experience to a viewer – VR goes even further because it makes one feel present in the artistic "text". VR becomes a

machine of empathy, a safe place to fight one's fears² and prejudice, a machine of subjectivity. This is how through new media art exercises the power of transforming social agenda into personal meaning for a participating viewer.

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² There have recently been developed a number of VR-projects aiming to heal phantom pains, fear of height of claustrophobia, PTSD etc. See: By Kirsten Weir. *Virtual reality expands its reach*. February 2018, Vol 49, No. 2.