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VILÉM FLUSSER    Reflexions on an Exhibition to be held at  
Galeria Współczesna, Warsaw, during next June.

At least three attitudes are possible with regard to that activity called "art" in Western tradition: (a) the technical attitude. ("Art" is manipulation of materials.) (b) the aesthetic attitude. ("Art" is a method to experience reality.) (c) the political attitude. ("Art" is a method to provoke changes in man and society.) "Avant-garde" art is, under attitude (a) the manipulation of new materials, it is experimental. Under attitude (b), "avant-garde" art is the revelation of hitherto unsuspected aspects of reality, it is research. Under attitude (c), "avant-garde" art is committed to a new type of man and society, it is revolutionary. The three attitudes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A critic may try to assume all three, when facing an exhibition. But for the artist himself, the three attitudes pose a dilemma. He must concentrate his interest either on his material, (and he then is a technician), or on his experience of the world, (and he is then an organ of perception), or on those who will receive his message, (and he is then politically committed). In terms of the theory of communication: he must concentrate on the medium, on the message, or on the receiver.

The phenomenon called "the present crisis of the arts" is due, in part, to the difficulty of this dilemma. The dilemma is difficult, at present, because each alternative is extremely provocative. (a) Recent technology has developed new types of materials, (like videotapes, holograms, cybernetic systems and so forth), which contain virtualities that are practically unknown, and which can be revealed only if artists manipulate those materials for their own sake. This is an enormous challenge. Imagine, for instance, what can be done with videotapes, if they are taken out of their present TV context: they can be used for documentation, for personal statements, for dialogues, as mirrors, for scientific observation, for medical and psychological treatment, for pedagogical purposes, for the exhibition of art, for art critique, for political critique, for the pure composition of sounds and shapes, for superposition of tape upon tape, and so forth. To manipulate such new materials is a true adventure.

(b) But there is another aspect to this, which is equally provocative. These new materials, and some older ones like photography, the cinema and the by now traditional TV, are means to perceive reality from points of view which have not been explored sufficiently so far. In at least two different ways. The superficial one is this: one may now perceive phenomena which went unperceived before. In photography one can see the fleeting moment. In the movies one can see "close", and from various standpoints, and by "travelling". In TV one can see the public in private. In video one can see sound and hear images, (through electronic intermix). In holograms one can see the backside of things. In cybernetic systems one can see and even manipulate complex processes like the life process. And those are only

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examples. The more profound change in reality perception is this: these new and some older media permit new categories of perception. Space and time changes. In the movies we can manipulate time and reverse it. In the videos we can transform time into space and make of the "previous" the visual background. In cybernetic systems we can make of time a dimension of space. In photography, (and even better in slides), we can make time transparent, and we can fix the flux of time in two dimensions. And so forth. Now this means not only that we can now perceive new aspects of reality, but also that we can now perceive the whole of reality under new structures. And for some artists this is even more challenging than to manipulate media for their own sake.

(c) But even this may not be the most exciting aspect for some artists. From their point of view a terrible process of mass alienation of man from his social, cultural and natural reality is in the making. The recent advances of technology, (and especially of the mass media), have created apparatus-like administrations in which men are changed into functioning producers and consumers, into parts of an automatic machinery and passive receivers of goods and ideas, and have thus lost, (or are losing), their dignity of true agents of their own decisions. To speak again in terms of the theory of communication: Recent advances of technology have brought about administrative apparatus which, (quite independent on their various ideologies), favour the distribution and broadcast of discourse, and make a creative and fundamentally human dialogue between individuals, therefore a true society, ever more impossible. Now some new media, (like videos, cybernetic systems and so forth), can be used as means for dialogues that break through the tyranny of established broadcasting systems. They can provoke dialogues on various levels, and thus show existentially the alienating power of those broadcasting systems. Therefore it is not the new media themselves, nor their function as organs of perception, but their dialogical structure, which fascinates some artists.

Let me now resume the dilemma, and, by the way, "the present crisis of the arts" which thus arises: Some artists are interested in new materials, and believe that one should no longer say "art", but "technique", in the classical sense of "techné". Other artists are interested in new ways of perceiving reality, and believe that "art" can no longer be separated meaningfully from "science", because it is committed to the same "truth". Still other artists are interested in the disalienating power of some new media, and believe that traditional "art", (both the elegant one and mass art), has become alienated by being broadcasted, and must be protested against through "anti-art", namely through dialogical use of new media.

A word of caution is now in order: The three attitudes here elaborated need not be taken consciously by contemporary artists. It is the business of the critic, not of the artist himself, to elaborate them. For

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instance: The American, Swiss and French video operators perhaps are not aware consciously that they are committed to the discovery of tape possibilities, and not to some message. That they do not want to "say" anything, but that they are learning how to speak in a new way. Artists committed to the elaboration of cybernetic systems, (like Tsai, Schoeffler and so forth), perhaps are not consciously aware that they are committed to discovery, and not to "beauty" or to those who will receive their message. And artists committed to "anti-art", or "art about art", (like Minkoff or the group of "art sociologique" of Forest, Fischer and Thenot), perhaps are not aware consciously that they are not committed against art, or for a new art form, but to those who will dialogue with them. The artists may perfectly mistake their own commitment, which increases present confusion. Nam Paik may believe that he make some sort of music, while he is learning how to use tapes, Tsai may believe that he is changing urban surroundings, while he is researching into life processes, and Forest may believe that he is making a research of a street, while he is provoking people to free themselves from street domination and alienation. But one should, as a rule, never listen to what artists are saying. One should try to understand what they are doing.

This is, after all, what exhibitions are for. To permit us to see what is being done in the very badly defined field of the arts at present. Of course, it is possible and legitimate to question whether exhibitions are still appropriate places for such a purpose. How can one "exhibit" for instance dialogical happenings? But then: exhibitions are changing. They no longer "exhibit", in the sense of exposing their visitors to passive consumption. They do provoke, (although in a questionable way), an active participation. Let us hope that the proposed exhibition at Galeria Współczesna will try to do this. It is not easy to do it, and the organizers and directors of the event are to be congratulated for their effort.

While writing this I do not know the program of the planned exhibition. But I know Mr. Tomek Kawiak, some aspects of his work, and his enthusiasm. And I am therefore optimistic about the results of the exhibition, in spite of my own negative experience at the last Bienal in São Paulo. No doubt: the success or failure of an exhibition depends on numerous factors, not all of them inherent in the program. One such factor is the fact that new media are expensive and difficult to handle. This should be a limiting factor in Poland, as it was in Brazil, though possibly less damaging. As for me, I shall do my best, both as a theoretician and from my previous experience, to contribute to a success of the proposed exhibition. It is needed, because the present crisis must be overcome one way or another, and it cannot be overcome without the active participation of at least part of the society out of which art is born and to which it is directed.