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Images of Society

on the works of Jakub Nepraš

by Noemi Smolik, November 2011

The works of Jakub Nepraš can at first be perplexing. What is it that is moving, what is it that is glowing, that lights up, are these images - and how are they created? The images of Nepraš appear to not have any material existence. They glow and shine, move, turn around, disappear, re-appear, and they often appear to be multi-layered, without the observer being able to see how that multi-layeredness is created. The impression of the immateriality of the images is very important for Nepraš, and he works very consciously based on that premise. But more on that, a bit later.

First, what do his images show? His 2007 installation, "Cultures", consists of a transparent plexiglass sheet hanging from a ceiling, upon which a video is projected. Because the sheet is see-through, the images appear to fly like optical chimeras through an empty room, showing proliferating, chaotic, turning and moving activity. Or is it a landscape? Or a pulsing city, maybe, or the circulatory system of an organism, or just a sophisticated, created electronic fantasy world? It is everything at once: an organism, a machine, a landscape, a city, it is real and fantastic, and is electronically manufactured.

It is actually a video collage, put together, with images cut and laid over one another, made from various videos. It is not a new method; surrealism made use of collages too, which appear to want to exceed the limits of the real. But instead of photos, newspaper clippings, and other paper shreds, the video collage works with images that have been electronically created. In the same way, the installation, "Fossil", from that same year, 2007, was created, in which images were also projected onto a plexiglass sheet. Driving cars, trees whose crowns bend in the wind, the surface of water upon which circles expand, people walking through the streets, red colored liquid pumped through transparent lines, dancers that form circles – in Nepraš's installations these are images, more like snatches of images, which meet the eyes for short moments. And the whole work is accompanied by sounds, one thinks that one hears flowing water, conversations, and the sound of birds chirping.

As a whole, those snatches of images build a pulsing structure, a hybrid of a human organism, a machine, a plant, a device for chemical experiments, and a fork at a street crossing. The circular movement, the pulsing, the pumping, and the flowing, are, however, the most essential elements of the structure, which expands over a surface, and in which there are innumerable interconnections, things overlapping, and superimpositions, and which do not appear to have any

hierarchical order, in the sense of up or down. Nepraš himself speaks, in connection with these images, of societal structures and of modern forms of communication, which he intends to visually bring to expression with his projections.

And that with justification, because who, upon seeing these images, will not think of the metaphor of the rhizome, with which the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Quattari have attempted to describe the current post-modern and post-structural societal organism. The Greek concept of rhizome comes from the plant world, and describes a root-type plant that expands across a surface, and whose roots flow into one another, interlinked. Ginger is a plant of that kind. Deleuze und Quattari chose that plant as a metaphor for the condition of today's society, which they juxtapose with the metaphor of the tree, from ancient Greece, that stands for a hierarchical order that grows upwards, and without interconnections. That metaphor was used for centuries not just to describe European societies, but also encyclopedias and libraries were created, based on it.

Starting from a description of the current structures of knowledge exchange, Deleuze and Quattari later expand on the rhizome principle, not just expanding it to cultural connections, but also to the entire society. Given that, the rhizome represents a freed society, in which various perspectives and approaches can be freely linked together, and which are beyond hierarchical interconnections. Today, that metaphor appears to be particularly well suited for describing social networks such as the Internet. Everything flows in this metaphor, everything is continuously in movement, coming together for a time, only to then separate, and joining in new connections, expanding over a surface, while avoiding hierarchies - movement, flow, and exchange are the magical words that also apply to the images projected onto plexiglass, in Nepraš's images.

Social networks such as the Internet introduce a type of communication that does not have any material basis. One does not need to open paper letters, nor to pick up a telephone, in that world. Rather, invisible light flows are at work there. And in that, we are again in a realm of immateriality. Nepraš plays with it. It is an essential part of his artistic work. His studies in the works with the titles, "Brainstorming", "Time Crust", "Reactor", "Processes", and "Meadow", which he created between 2007 and 2011; light as the carrier of images onto plexiglass walls, onto plastic bottles, onto stones, and entire reliefs made of special plexiglass sheets, which are recessed into stones; projection continuously becomes a new study - or better yet, an assurance, that this magical actuality really does exist. That there are visual images, even if they do not, in the conventional sense, exist in the form of shaped plastic works, or a piece of paper.

Light that images can transmit, is energy. Light is visible, and makes visible. But what about other energies? How can they be made visible? For example, if rooms are filled with energies, everyone can feel them, but what about seeing them, as well? In 2010, Nepraš built a wall made of plexiglass, into which stones were recessed. He projected cloud-like forms, flowing water, and patterns onto them. He called this installation "Spirit of the Place". Is it an attempt to visualize the spirit - another word for the contemporary concept, energy? One awaits the future work of this artist with much anticipation. The hope is that the work will not be invisible; that would be a bitter loss for contemporary art. The works are almost immaterial, as it is.