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SOCIAL NETWORKS 2

Interview with Victoria Vesna

Inna Razumova on May 15 2001

issue 16

This interview focuses on Vesna's recent collaborative project *Datamining Bodies*. The project takes two forms: one is an installation and performance that took place in an old Coal Mine in Dortmund and the other network art <http://notime.arts.ucla.edu/mining/applet/index.html>.

Biography: Victoria Vesna is an artist, theorist, and chair of the department of Design Media Arts at UCLA. Her work has moved from performance and video installations to experimental research that connects networked environments to physical public spaces. Vesna has initiated and produced a number of projects that address issues of identity, artificial intelligence, telepresence and database aesthetics <http://time.arts.ucla.edu/>. Her work has been featured in Art in America, Artweek, Newsweek, Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle, as well as Der Spiegel (Germany), The Irish Times (Ireland), Tema Celeste (Italy), and Veredas (Brazil). She has received numerous grants from various educational and industrial foundations.

Inna Razumova: How did your background in performance and video installations influence your later work in digital media?

Victoria Vesna: I was always interested in exploring, experimenting and improvising. Performance was the easiest and most immediate way out of the established gallery world expectations and video installations gave me room to experiment with the intersection of performance and technology -- one cannot conceptualize an installation without considering how the audience moves through the piece, even if it has no interactive elements. My early work was embedded in the alternative music scene, the clubs and cable TV. The need to extend to an audience outside of the established art scene was always present, so naturally I was drawn to the net.

My love for performance was rekindled recently when a group of us in the UC (UC Digital Arts Network: UC DARNET) collaborated on a networked performance piece with Karen Black. We were commissioned to do a piece for a conference on collaborations at the Arizona State University. For this event we hired actress Karen Black and she was our "agent", participating in an academic conference. Equipped with a lipstick camera and earpiece, she was wirelessly connected to our group. This piece was exciting for me because it rekindled my interest in exploring performance. In my opinion, the net is performative in its nature and I am really interested to play with the possibilities.

I.R: The Web is an ephemeral, virtual medium that is associated with the mobility, manipulability, and transformation of data. Web is also one of this culture's primary places for a fetishization of the body. (spy cams, pornography, dating networks, avatar-based chat rooms, etc.). In your opinion, why is a medium that functions mostly through disembodiment so fascinated with the idea of body?

V.V: It is because our bodies do not only consist of embodied, physical parts and our

minds are not separate from our bodies and we are not separate identities. I do not consider this an opposition (idea of body / disembodiment), but a return to learning that we have etheric bodies, and can make telepathic connections to others on the other side of the planet. It is very empowering to have a sense of connection to someone who shares your ideas, whatever they may be, and feel a physical sensation in relation to this. Of course we are all in a very primitive stage and the first step is the voyeuristic, sexual exploration. It is well recognized that these parts of ourselves — the invisible and the sexual — are the most repressed in our Western society. The Internet provides a space for exploring our many identities, and experimenting with ideas of extending our influence beyond our local spaces.

I.R: Media has been viewed as "prosthesis" or an extension of the body in the sense of McLuhan. Considering the maturity of the Internet, how has that relationship changed?

V.V: Prosthesis, is an artificial device to replace a missing part of the body. I do not believe that we are missing any parts of ourselves — it is a matter of evolving and awakening all our potential. So, I consider this to be our baby steps into the unknown potential of ourselves, when we need help from technological devices. Eventually, we will be able to teleport our bodies and telepathically communicate to each other.

The Internet is still in its early stages, not really mature. On a human development scale I would place it at early puberty. It is just beginning to take shape and move away from flat documents that are hyperlinked. But, it did change dramatically in the past 5 years, and although it is still a "prosthesis" of sorts, it really is helping us visualize the invisible exchange of data. Data exchange between people.

Some perceive the net as a space for commerce, others as a space for enlightenment. For me, the intersection of these contradictions, the space in between, is the most interesting. The idea of an extension eventually morphs into acceptance of ourselves as a network that is part of a larger network. I imagine the greatest shift will happen when the network becomes embedded in everything through technology and via our conscious acceptance of the overall connectivity. Extension seems to bring an image of going outside of oneself.

I.R: What is the importance of the physical spaces (site-specific installations) in your work? Specifically, your recent project "Datamining Bodies" took place in a coalmine in Dortmund, Germany. Could you tell us more about why you chose this specific site, and what its importance is to the whole project? Does it function as a metaphor, a context, a historical parallel, or a physical body for the online part of the "Datamining Bodies"?

V.V: Physical spaces are really important to me. They are vehicles for the "virtual" just as our bodies are for the "soul". I cannot start work on an installation before I am in the space, feeling its specific quality.

As far as the installation in the coal mine goes, I did not choose this site. This was a group show for which I was commissioned to do a piece that was connected to the net. I first did some research about the site itself, then started thinking of the mine and data metaphorically.

Zeche Zollern II/IV is a coal mine that ceased operations in the late 1950s and that had been recently converted into a museum dedicated to technology. In World War II, it was one of the largest Nazi shelters. The exhibition was a sort of a celebration of a move from the Industrial Age to the Information Age and the artists were the signifiers of this transition. I had a problem with this concept. There is no clean shift from one age to another and I did not want to participate in this idea. So I decided to challenge it by connecting it to the uneasy idea of datamining bodies. The organizer was not very pleased with the piece and consequently made our work there pretty nightmarish (but that's another story).

"Datamining" is a term used in computer science, traditionally defined as "information retrieval." Many metaphors that refer to the physical act of mining, such as "drilling" or "digging," are commonly used when discussing the activity of accessing information.

What is striking, if not disturbing, when researching the practice of "datamining" information (whether it be medical, statistical or business), is the "inhumanity," the disassociation from the people who actually carry or contribute this information. I was reading *How We Became Posthuman* by Kathryn Hayles at the time and this influenced my thinking in relation to datamining. With this in mind, my aim was to create a site-specific piece that commented on the abstraction of information by looking at the notion of mining data in connection to the metaphorical representations of the human body, and the false notion that there had been a clear-cut shift from the Industrial to the Information Age. I felt that the site of the now defunct coal mine was ideal for delivering a message of warning about the dangerous aspects of mining bodies of

people for data. Or, worse, reducing people to abstracted data.

I.R: In the "Datamining Bodies" new data such as sound, digital video, and stills are being ingested by the "body" in mine space through the rules of tensegrity and datamining. Could you tell us a bit more about how it happens? Specifically, why the deeper one mines, the more layered the data and the less time there is to data mine? Was there a reason for setting up the database that way?

V.V: The idea of data ingested by the "body" stays at a conceptual level. To backtrack a bit, I was actively researching visualization of networks, and learning about the principles of tensegrity in relation to natural systems. I was inspired to somehow utilize these principles for envisioning a different type of body, an "energetic body," meaning a body that is networked and built from information, but not de-humanised. I got really interested in using tensegrity, which is proven to work in physical spaces (Buckminster Fuller, Kenneth Snelson) and appears in natural structures (Donald Ingber, Scientific American "The Architecture of Life"). I concluded this principle would work great in information / network space. But, it is not a simple programming task — it requires a certain philosophical outlook and it took me awhile to find a creative programmer to work with. Appropriately, I found a person who had similar ideas and was already developing a software using these principles on the web. Gerald de Jong, author of fluidiom, became my new collaborator and the first piece we worked on was Datamining Bodies. We moved on to developing "notime", so a lot of Datamining Bodies remains in the conceptual realm.

I.R: Forgive my "data mining" you on the same project, why did you limit your database to the mixture of images and text from coal mines of the industrial era, psychoanalysis texts, and medical images of the body? Could you comment on the significance to these choices in "Datamining Bodies"?

V.V: The image of the coal mine is from the space itself. Text about coal mines is from newspapers (usually short blurbs about numbers of deaths with no elaboration). The psychoanalytical text is by Larry Rickels whose research focuses on Nazi Psychology. Larry is someone who explores this subject in depth and I felt it is better to use his voice than my surface knowledge of the subject. I consider the ultimate datamining bodies as the human genome project. While developing the piece, I walked over to the medical center here at UCLA and got the data from the source. When I told them the name of the piece, they said: "Oh, we do that every day here".

I.R: There are seven levels to the Datamining Body. Is this a possible metaphor for Dante's seven circles of hell?

V.V: Dante certainly came up, but it wasn't my primary source of inspiration. My interest in abstracting the idea of body without dehumanizing it to "information" led me to consider some of the Eastern representations of the energy centers, specifically the Chakra system. "Chakras," which mean "wheels" in Sanskrit, are points of energy believed to run along our spine. Ancient Hindus formulated that there were seven of these energy wheels, each a different color and spinning in a clockwise direction. Interestingly enough, the spacing of chakras actually matches major nerve or endocrine centres, while the colors correspond to the electromagnetic spectrum. I decided to borrow the Chakra structure loosely, using the colors of the electromagnetic field and shapes constructed from tensegrity. The idea of descending was magnified by the audio aspect which was created by David Beaudry. As you descend through the layers, the sound moves up (speakers were positioned from right above the viewer to right by the feet). The sound layers, beginning with a clear space (white/no text/no image) and ending with six layers of sound, a lot of information and very little time. You would really feel the pressure of sound above you and an uneasy lack of control by the overwhelming data being thrown at you.

The entire move through the "body" is 333 minutes.

I.R: After interacting with the datamining body online several times in a row, I noticed that the white sphere began to change its shape dramatically, stretching and flickering with increasing speed. It seemed so alive and disrupted that I was afraid that I hurt or damaged it. Do the participants in the gallery or online have a major influence on the structure and fabric of tensile shapes?

V.V: Gerald de Jong authored the piece in fluidiom which allows for programming behaviors that change over time. He totally understood where I was coming from and programmed / weaved the image that I conceptualized into a fluidiom fabric. I believe that the ideas of what we would have liked to happen, including what you are alluding to, did not really materialize. We moved on to collaborating on a new piece dealing

with no time.

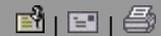
I.R: In your writings, you have mentioned that you challenge the Western culture's dichotomy between body and mind. In your view, what is the alternative? Synthesis, poiesis, scientific materialism?

V.V: The alternative is already there. When the Western ideas truly merge with Eastern philosophies, we will have a much richer world.

I.R: Do you see any parallels between your datamining bodies and Body Without Organs ("non-stratified, unformed, intense matter") in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari? Does tensegrity lead to stratification?

V.V: Actually, I was really into the Body Without Organs while developing Bodies Incorporated. Traces of that influence remain of course -- all work is an evolution, and I can see that connection, although I have to admit I was not making a conscious reference, it was already absorbed. Does tensegrity lead to stratification? I do not dare answer that question! That would have to be a highly interdisciplinary discussion involving many people — biologists, engineers, architects, artists, theorists. And, I am sure many answers would emerge. Tensegrity is an amazing system and there is much to be learned from nature. How we use that knowledge remains to be seen.

Inna Razumova is a current graduate student at the Cadre laboratory for Digital Media Arts.



::CrossReference

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