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Oliver Grau Interview: The Image--from Real to Virtual

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The Image--from Real to Virtual
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Oliver Grau talkes about the fundamental functions of the image. With a background in art history he is on the forefront to "historize" the new media movement and view it from an unusual, retrospective vantage point.

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Deutschlandfunk: We live today - in the age of expansion of the audiovisual media - in a veritable maelstrom of images. At no other time were there as many as today; images, in the past, were exceptional phenomena reserved for ritual, cult, later art, and then museums and galleries. In the age of cinema, television, and the World Wide Web we are surrounded by images wherever we go. For many years, the discipline of art history had a monopoly on the scholarly interpretation of images. It would appear that those times are over and the image is now analyzed by other disciplines are in competition with each other. In your book on "Visual Strategies," which was very well received, you examine media art under the aspect of "Virtual Art in the Present and the Past" - which are the historical precursors of contemporary media art?

Oliver Grau: Whether virtual art, NetArt, or other varieties of digital art - quite a number: recently, computers have transformed the image into a sphere that appears to "live." A new form of art has developed in high tech labs, which can be viewed at festivals, that gives us a glimpse of what the future of the Web will look like. Moreover, as soon as network connections are faster and can handle more data, this new art will arrive in our homes. Virtual images are frequently referred to as being without a history; however, in actual fact the latest variety of these images is based on a history of immersion in art, which has remained unrecognized until now, that goes back at least 2000 years: The idea of placing the spectator in an enclosed image space of illusion in order to produce the feeling of actually being within the images did not originate with the technical invention of computer-generated virtual reality. On the contrary, virtual reality merely renews an ancient motif in the relationship of humans to images. Within the tradition of producing and staging illusions, the immersive-virtual image spaces represent a vanishing point, an extreme, where this relationship of humans to images stands out very clearly. Virtual image worlds and their media in history describe an arch that extends from wall paintings in Pompeii, via image spaces of modern times - the panoramas - to 3D cinemas, contemporary IMAX theaters, and the latest, already famous, representatives of computer art. Please do not misunderstand me - I am not saying that new image technologies, such as the CAVE, have existed before in some form or other. However, in the past, there were always artists and their patrons, whether ecclesiastical, political or commercial, who conceived of fascinating the spectator with the maximum of image suggestivity, suspending their critical distance to the images, and making them into imaginary participants in the events, or scene, portrayed. The mightiest appearances of this image history were the 360()() image spaces that completely surrounded the spectator on all sides.

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Deutschlandfunk: You are an art historian yet you are working currently, for example, on constructing a data bank of virtual art; you focus on media history, on aspects of telepresence in art, even genetic art. What led you to take this direction?

Oliver Grau: Art historians have always included the image media of their time in their considerations, from stamps to cinema films. Today, media art, a fine-spun fabric between science and art, is exploring the aesthetic potential of interactive, processual image worlds. Prominent representatives of virtual image culture are involved in basic scientific research; they combine art and science in the service of today's most complex technologies for generating images. Mainly, these are internationally well-known artists, who work in high-tech research labs on the development of, for example, new interfaces and forms of interaction. For me being engaged with these developments in science; it is a very exciting process. However, it is true that, in the course of its two-hundred year history, art history as a discipline has amassed a vast store of knowledge about images. If one looks back to Vasari and the Renaissance, knowledge about images, a treasure trove of humankind, is firmly anchored in the discipline of art history. Naturally this implies special responsibilities; not least with regard to contemporary developments, as we are currently experiencing with the revolution of digital images. Interestingly, these developments and processes, which many people find unsettling or even threatening - for example, the super-fast image worlds on MTV, large-format digital screens in public places in the cities, special effects in high-tech cinemas, the illusions produced by virtual image spaces where we see ourselves as avatars - are much easier to explain and understand within a historical context. Certain recently established academic subjects, which lack this background, are unable to offer that. Eventually, they will avail themselves of the knowledge and methods of art history.

Deutschlandfunk: Then as now art historians continue to study classical works of painting, drawing, architecture, and sculpture. What can or must art history do to confront the onslaught of the "new media"?

Oliver Grau: Historical research remains the central pillar of art history and this applies equally to our research project on Immersive Art, for example, when we analyze panoramas or the frescoes in the medieval papal palace at Avignon, draw comparisons with media art, and examine these art works in a wider context, which often remains inaccessible to specialists doing research in a single epoch. It is our goal to filter out the old from what is new so that we can recognize fully what really is new. Art history is well prepared to meet the onslaught of the new media, perhaps better than any other discipline. This is both due to its general approach and to its instruments. Today, these have taken a great step forward in their development: we contribute to this with the construction and management of a data bank of images of virtual art that uses multimedia-based information; from technical blueprints to videostreaming. This endeavor aims to provide a showcase for media art and documents its rapid development using a new model system in order to portray adequately the fundamentally different nature of digital art. However, you are right: the onslaught of the new media also means that we must hurry. For before we have helped to establish this art in public awareness, it threatens to be lost because of its short-lived storage media. Thus, we are not only contributing to research on digital art, we also hope to pave the way for digital art into collections and thus secure its future.

Deutschlandfunk: "Immersion" plays a prominent role in your book and it is probably closely connected to the other current buzzword "interactivity" - what does "immersion" mean to you?

Oliver Grau: Immersion is produced when a work of art and the image apparatus converge, or when the message and the medium form an almost inseparable unit. In this state, the idea of a finite work, and thus the distance of genres that are perceived as separate, no longer exists. The medium becomes invisible. Immersive art tends to stage moments that can be characterized as Dionysian: exhilaration and intoxication. Immersion is undoubtedly key to any understanding of the development of media in general, although the term may appear somewhat opaque and contradictory. Obviously, there is not a simple relationship of "either-or" between critical distance and immersion; the relationship is multi facetted, dialectical, in part contradictory, and certainly highly dependent on the disposition of the observer and his or her media competence, which has increased over the course of history. Immersion can be an intellectually stimulating process; however, in the present as in the past, in most cases immersion is mentally absorbing and a process, a change, a passage from one mental state to another. Diminishing critical distance and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening characterize it. Aesthetic experience, which relies on concepts of reflective thinking space, as proposed by Cassirer, Adorno, or more recently, Hal Foster, tends to be undermined by strategies of immersion.

Deutschlandfunk: Locating and categorizing the so-called "virtual" images within art history is one issue; another fascinating question is to extrapolate, or make a

prognosis, what kind of effects this unprecedented, large-scale social experiment of bombardment with virtual images will have on people.

Oliver Grau: This is what we are trying to find out. History shows that people's appetite for novel illusions is an anthropological constant, which, together with the permanent attempts on the part of those in positions of power to impress, divert, and subject others with suggestive new worlds of images, runs like a thread through history. These strategies of the illusion industry for diverting people's attention must be confronted by the ability to create and maintain a distance. Obviously, any ban on images would be nonsense: this ability must be achieved through investing in a cultural skill that we call image and media competence. We must make the transition from mere perception of images to a reflective and critical relationship with ever more and ever new image worlds. We shall only achieve this by increasing our knowledge about the technical, psychological, and physiological bases of images, whereby knowledge of the history of images plays a decisive role; it is taken for granted in the cases of other cultural skills, such as writing and mathematics.

Deutschlandfunk: Critics of cinema have called it the "dream factory" and the "illusion machine." Today, it would appear that the naive fascination with cinema has been replaced by an aesthetic and critical consumer attitude, which, however, does not preclude enjoyment. How big are the chances - or the danger - of being catapulted out of the new interactive, illusive, cyber-quality of virtual reality through breaking the illusion?

Oliver Grau: This depends on the makers behind the medium, and often on the artists who utilize it or modify it technically themselves. Since a couple of years, this has been a hot topic of debate in virtual art, centering on innovative interfaces, promoting distance. Critical media artists demand interfaces that fracture immersion, do not allow natural illusory integration into image worlds, and only open the medium as a space for reflection on the basis of distance. As you said, it was the same with cinema: first, there was a phase of utter fascination with the illusion - at the time it consisted of silent black and white moving pictures - so that film-specific aesthetics, and thus art, could develop. Virtual art is taking a similar road today, although the process is much faster because of the WorldWideWeb.

Deutschlandfunk: Is there a danger that people will disappear into the images, will become one with them? A horror scenario of the future where people will withdraw totally from reality into virtual spaces of wellness and alluring dreams that are dangled in front of them?

Oliver Grau: Yes and no. The essence of media revolutions is that at least two camps - utopia versus apocalypse - argue over the future of the medium. One side sees in the "new media" the advent of the classless society, where heaven on earth - or at least in cyberspace - will come about whereas on the other side, apocalypse means the end of the body, or our species, through digital, nanotechnological, or transgenic effects. I do not have to mention any names here; anyone who has followed the discussion knows who belongs in which camp. Ultimately, what these developments in the media will bring, is a lot less spectacular and remains subject to the laws of the market. Vilém Flusser's prognosis, for example, that everyone will leave the job market and vegetate in image caves until medicine has the task of switching off our superfluous bodies, is not likely to come about in such an extreme form. After all, we are needed as consumers.

Deutschlandfunk: Will the development of the new media culminate in a final synthesis - a medium of total illusion?

Oliver Grau: [laughs] The panorama, films, computer displays: technical image media are aggregates of continually changing machines, forms of organization, and materials. In spite of all the standards, they are seldom stable, and always lured by the fascination of enhancing the illusion. If we look at history, we recognize an endless stream, which, even when we consider supposedly secure entities, such as the cinema, reveals itself to be a kaleidoscope of elements in constantly changing, ever new formations of evolutionary media development. Thus, computer-generated virtual reality is not really a revolution, as its champions proclaim; nevertheless, within the cultural and historical development of the media, it is a decisive landmark. Since Sutherland's HMD, many more image displays have been developed and people will dream up many more prototypes until standards for the human-machine interface are established; insofar as the idea of longer-term standards does not contradict from the outset the evolutionary phenomenology of the media and their telos. In this context, it is immaterial whether a specific technical apparatus will exist in the future that fulfills such utopian ideas to a greater or lesser extent. More important is the manifest search, which is underway in a variety of media, for an illusionary bonding with the image that in the end effect remains imperceptible.

Deutschlandfunk: What kind of visual competence is needed to engage with this expansion and spread of images that pull the wool over our eyes, this fraud through images? Does this not mean that, for example, education and art teaching, are faced with new tasks?

Oliver Grau: We do not need more subjects and disciplines that start over to explain the world according to their lights. What we do need is to look at this phenomenon together, an overview, a panorama. We need an awareness of the image, of the image as illusion, in its historical dimensions. We need a combination of historical knowledge about images, contemporary technical tricks for generating images, and the neural function and psychological effect of images. Analyzing image worlds and how they are generated creates media competence and opens up the media for the creation of art. A truly up-to-date art education would convey competence in the new media to students just as it imparts essential experience with materials and colors. Only a self-confident approach to the new media and their products will perhaps lead to the recognition that, in the final analysis, everything is based on drawing.

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