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Semantics of Multi-textures or Multi-textural Semantics:
Pixel paintings by the artist duo
Anne Peschken and Marek Pisarsky (Urban Art)

Construction of the Past

The pixel paintings by the Berlin-based duo Urban Art (Anne Peschken and Marek Pisarsky) presented at the Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń revolve around 20th-century German history, which they illustrate by means of a several key images: a view from a Reichsparteitag (the annual rally and convention of the NSDAP, held during the years 1923 to 1939, which after 1927 was regularly held in Nuremberg); a look inside the Bundestag and the Stock Exchange, a scene of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and a reference to the communist regime and its familiar slogan "Workers of the world…" The series is completed by paintings of a huge container ship and a sea of flowers. The subjects are visually intense and poignant, capturing the eye and demanding one's attention. The reason they work in exactly this way lies in the fact that they originate from well-known photographs of crucial historic events that have already deeply inscribed themselves into society's collective mind and consciousness by constant repetition and numerous reproductions. According to John Fiske, the process of medialization comprises not only the present but also the past, with historical records and media images not so much representing the past as constructing it.[1] History is no longer assumed to be a chain of fixed, objectively defined facts, but rather it is understood to be an on-going process that continually re-interprets the past – and in doing so often takes on the perspective of different media in art or pop culture. "When we enter this symbolic order, the past is already present as historical tradition, but the meaning of such historical remains is not pre-defined, rather it continually changes in accordance to the transformation of the information network. This is also why narratives of the past constantly change and the past itself is permanently created anew."[2] This is also how polyphonic simulations of history are created, which are intrinsically connected to narrating and tale telling. This dimension inevitably entails further fictionalisation and the blurring of the border between reality and medialization.

Paul Ricoeur once stated that "the foundation for the representation of the past manifests

itself as the presence of an image." In our ever-changing collective memory, certain visual clichés collide and comingle, due to the different angles and perspectives from which they are presented to us. This produces different variations, perceptions, and narrations of the past. According to Walter Benjamin, "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again".

This aspect of the medialization of memory and the free circulation of visual templates in respect to important events of 20th century German history is strongly highlighted in the pixel paintings of Urban Art. Their series can be considered as a kind of meta-construction - a construction superimposed onto an already existing structure. While the artists are freely moving between medialized and constructed narrations of the past, they still pursue their own arbitrary choice of sources thus creating yet another layer of meaning, where each "fact" gains its own semantic meaning. There is no way of retrieving "bare" facts – if ever there were any. The "source" from which Urban Art are drawing is the present condition of the media world: "For a long time – at least since the 1960s it's been photography that defines the way in which we remember and assess important conflicts. The museum of our memories consists today primarily of visual experiences." It is this statement by Susan Sontag that describes the perimeters within which Peschken and Pisarsky make their selections, picking from the enormous flood of images that the media seem to drown us in.

From close range, the pixel paintings are entirely illegible but as we increase the distance -literally and metaphorically speaking - and walk away from them, they become more and more focused and easier to decipher. This peculiar "double perspective", inherent to all pixel images, becomes here a metaphor for the perception of history. History after all, also emerges only after a certain lapse of time and in spatial distance. It gets clearer exactly because it contains less detail; it becomes a constructed 'fact' extracted from the texture of previous events.

As far as the topic of the pixel paintings is concerned, they all depict accumulations of things or crowds of people and masses. The members of the Bundestag, the participants of the NSDAP rally, Berliners celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall, demonstrating workers and nervously gesticulating stock brokers – they all enthusiastically take part in one memorable event or another. The general theme of the pixel paintings, therefore, is mass psychology: its power, its contagiousness and omnipotence, consuming one individual after another, a

phenomenon so well described by Elias Canetti in "Masse und Macht" (1960) (Masses and Power). In his book Canetti aptly describes the process of losing one's individuality within the masses as an act of liberating the individual from the confrontation with the chaotic world. For the price of drowning in the crowd, the individual gains a feeling of power that only the crowd can provide. This very aspect is shown in the paintings of Urban Art, which – not only due to the chosen technique of "analogue pixilation" and the use of mimetic and non-mimetic means – demonstrate the tension between the individual and the crowd. Each single pixel, just like each depicted human individual, is part of a bigger structure within which it is hardly discernable but at the same time indispensable. Reflecting the tension between individuality and self-abandonment extends even to the way the pixel paintings are produced at the "Globalpix" company (more about this later) where anonymous factory workers execute orders issued by the artists, *de facto* setting mass production into motion.

Another interesting aspect of the artworks is the fact that some of them could be described as a synesthetic. Especially the painting entitled "68" seems to be "loud" - since its main subject is a man screaming through a megaphone (this man is Rudi Dutschke, a left-wing student leader and icon of the '68 movement). No doubt that he is just about to say something! In other paintings the cheer of the masses is also nearly audible, triggering the viewers' own chain of associations and personal memories of having taken part in similar events or having seen them on TV. The motifs therefore seem to have been carefully selected according to a sophisticated system designed to direct the viewers' attention towards the possibility of being seduced by the crowd, regardless of what the reason for its agglomeration might be. Clearly, it is the same seductive power that emanates from the elated crowd of Berliners celebrating the Fall of the Wall as from the participants of the Parteitag cheering and saluting the "Führer".

Izabela Kowalczyk underlines that art taking on the issue of interpreting history, "probes the border between facts and fiction and reveals what happens where they collide. It attempts to go beyond the dialectics of truth and fiction, past and present, memory and oblivion." The pixel paintings produced by the artist duo Urban Art aim in a certain way to (de)construct historical discourses. They point out that a reconstruction of history is impossible and that to create yet another construction is the only possibility left. These constructions are based on a kind of juggling with media images – a true recycling process of its own which evokes new facets of past events through constant rotation and reappearances of media images.

Overproduction and Petrified Irony

Apart from dealing with the issue of constructing history and the constant influx of visual templates, the pixel paintings also touch on the issue of overproduction and art recycling. As Marcin Giżycki points out, the sore spot of today's contemporary culture is its overproduction. Sylvère Lotringer - a French cultural theorist - comes to a similar conclusion predicting that the end of art might be brought on by the unimpeded growth of overproduction. "Just like any other material art functions within a closed circuit endlessly self-processing its own goods to meet the demand of the modern market." Wistfully he adds: "All that is left, is the never-ending recycling of dying art; where deconstruction and self-absorption have taken up the place of enigmatic otherness (…)." Frank Stella has a similar outlook. The American painter disapprovingly described the „Modern Starts" exhibition at MoMA in New York in 2000 (curated by John Elderfield & Co.) as only presenting „masturbatory insights" and mocked the exhibit further by stating: "Instead of depositing them (the exhibits of the much aged collection – M.S.) in museums, which obviously do not follow the latest art trends (…), MoMA should rather hand them over to the younger generation of artists, so well aware of ecological issues, who would certainly know best how to make use of the old art by recycling it as raw material and incorporating it into their own works." Jean Baudrillard on the other hand complains that, "remakes and recycling art excel with an irony so threadbare and worn out that it can only be the result of complete disappointment in the original objects - a petrified irony.". The French philosopher then poses the rhetorical question of whether art that endlessly entertains itself with *recycling* can ever in fact produce a masterpiece, adding promptly: "The overwhelming majority of contemporary art is devoted to exactly this: it is busy appropriating banality, rubbish and mediocrity as some kind of value or ideology."

Intelligent Recycling by „Globalpix"

Could it be true then, that art based on the idea of recycling fails to be exciting, original and vitally ironic? It seems that the "Globalpix" project by Urban Art compellingly proves that this attitude can in fact bring new, exciting and creative impulses that re-define and essentially enrich the condition of contemporary art. Acknowledging the state of overproduction in the art world, Peschken and Pisarsky placed a newspaper announcement asking people to donate any unwanted canvases and paintings. Much to their own surprise the response was overwhelming, and they were able to literally collect tons of canvases. The next step was setting up the „Globalpix" factory in Nowa Huta, where unemployed local women were given jobs. They were told to tear the canvases into strips that were subsequently

interwoven and mounted on frames so as to create new art pieces.

A short film about the factory that was shot in 2006 shows the production hall where women in headscarves and work clothes are busy recycling disused paintings that in times of art overproduction were doomed to destruction by their previous owners. The exclusively female workers smile and sing at work, weaving the new compositions. In the background hangs a no-smoking sign when a man comes strolling down the aisle – possibly the shift manager. Work is easy and - one is tempted to say - it's a typically female occupation, resembling handiwork. The sight of the "Globalpix" company deceitfully resembles factories of the communist era where a joyful work atmosphere was enforced from above and everybody simply **had** to be happy. Contributing to the common good, one couldn't help but to burst into cheerful songs. It is also this choice of the location in Nowa Huta that reveals the irony of this project by Urban Art.

However, the sarcasm is not only directed towards the past but also at the present - with the company's director resembling rather a pastiche, expressing views that mimic today's business relations and an economy heavily relying on EU-subsidies. In his opinion, artists often neglect the market, which consequently leads to overproduction, at which point the "Globalpix" company steps in. The company's name denotes world-wide aspirations whereas its locations bows to the latest corporate efforts to find cheap labour outside of Western Europe, thus reviving a formerly desolate industrial space in Nowa Huta. From today's point of view, the company's advantage also lies in its ecological orientation focussing on recycling and the use of recyclable materials. As the director proudly announces: this is intelligent recycling. The majority of his workforce was previously unemployed, finding new jobs thanks to this project. In this respect "Globalpix" meets all viable modern business standards, with only one cloud on the horizon forecasting a slightly exploitative aspect: the management is already on the search for even cheaper labour. As the director explains: The competition never sleeps which forces the management to move on to Ukraine and Rumania where labour costs are up to 30% lower than in Poland. Even the quality of work is likely to improve there, thanks to the fact that Ukrainian women are famous for their weaving skills.

As we can see, "Globalpix" is surprisingly complex in nature. Its corporate identity has been thoughtfully arranged to oscillate around pressing economic concerns of the globalized world but at the same time remains highly ambiguous. The company might as well exist seriously or just be a mock version. Nevertheless, several aspects highlighted by the movie ask poignant questions about employer-employee relationships, production methods in

general and specific business practices based on recycling.

Pixel paintings

The paintings produced by the "Globalpix" company consist of woven strips of canvas donated by people who responded to the advert posted by "Urban Art". The strips are then interwoven and initially create an arbitrary image mounted onto new stretchers. The original state of the torn canvases – their former subject, painting technique, texture or even their physical condition – is no longer of any importance. Even the very authorship becomes undistinguishable. Due to this "mechanized" production method that leaves no room for traditional means of composing, the recycling process creates an accidental structure made up from repetitive modules in the form of little squares. Each of these square units boasts different colours and textures, varies in the thickness of the paint and the quality of the surface, and reveals the ground coat and the way different kinds of canvases were interwoven. There is neither a hint of the individual artistic gesture, so much beloved by modernism, nor of a traditional composition with a clearly defined centre on which all other composition elements are based. Effectively, the "Globalpix" work system generates uniform surfaces where each element is equally important and as significant as the next one. It is the factory worker choosing the strips and the arbitrary results of the weaving process that determine the appearance of the pieces, rather than the artist's wilful intention and individual gesture.

On this stage, the new structures resemble nothing but colourful pixels without any pictorial sense. In an abstract way, they seem to flutter about, produce optical scintillations and vibrate in contrasting colours. Remotely, they are related to post-impressionist pointillist paintings where each paint dot was applied separately so that the whole image only became discernible on the viewer's retina when perceived from a distance. The works of Urban Art also bring to mind the paintings of the American artist Ellsworth Kelly who in the early 1950s experimented with coincidence and chance resulting in a series called *"Spectrum of Colors Arranged by Chance"* and "Colours for a Big Wall". Kelly - in search for ways to free himself from traditional image composing - randomly arranged square blocks of different colours which - despite all obvious differences - seem to be true predecessors of the "Globalpix" paintings. The same can be said of those works by Gerhard Richter, on which he arranged small rectangular fields of "colour samples". While the surfaces of Kelly's and Richter's works are applied in an evenly flat manner – the paintings of Urban Art distinguish themselves through the pure materiality resulting from the weaving process, that leaves

behind jagged edges and protruding strips. And, there is also the exceptional production process during which the woven surfaces represent hardly more than a stage of transition. Following this arbitrary, mechanical phase comes the moment when, according to a certain scheme, the image content is transferred onto the woven surface

The basis for the picture motifs are photographs edited in Photoshop so as to obtain an extremely low resolution. These digital images are broken down to the pixels from which they are made. They form the model according to which the pixels are transferred onto the woven canvas. Either the factory worker or Peschken and Pisarsky themselves meticulously transfer each pixel onto subsequent squares of the interlaced background, thereby creating traditional, analogue paintings, which in the end evoke a digital impression. Each woven square becomes in its own way a pixel made from real material. Usually, the background of the image motif remains unchanged, retaining the original colours and textures of the weaving phase, heightening the impression of optical disarray and imbalance. The pictures created in this technique should therefore be seen from a distance, as only in this way can the recipient fully "embrace" the subject and decipher the motif. Additionally, the large formats suggest a rather remote perception, since viewed from close range they tend to overwhelm the viewer with their materiality and illegibility. Seen from a distance, the colourful squares fall into line, assemble into recognizable formations, in which each pixel has its own precisely defined place and function within the painting's appearance.

The process of this intelligent *recycling* produces artworks which are complex and multi-layered in nature, thanks to the various canvas strips that in the past used to be artworks themselves, but also due to the interweaving done at the "Gobalpix" company, and the painted-on motifs, taken from low resolution photos. Art builds up upon art, layer upon layer, creating the texture of a time maze where in one art piece other art elements from past decades can be found. Recycling that uses painting as raw material is by no means a typical form of recycling that usually re-uses leftovers or waste material. Within the system of "Globalpix" the overproduction of art is re-fed into the art cycle; paintings that evidently became redundant (by having been sent to the Globalpix factory set up by Urban Art) are still the basis of this new kind of painting – one that is decisively closer to the pulse of time.

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While the pixel paintings by Urban Art strikingly bring up questions concerning the (de)construction of historical narration and the recycling of visual templates, the whole concept of "Globalpix" definitely contradicts the thesis expressed by Sylvère Lotringer, Jean

Baudrillard and Frank Stella that recycling in art is a form of masturbation, a mere syndrome of its demise and failure. Urban Art's pixel project based on art overproduction as well as on intelligent recycling, not only goes beyond the usual self-referentiality of art or any kind of 'petrified' irony – it does in fact offer some interesting reflections on the malleability of media and historic records (which are always constructed and intermediary), on the relation of painted images to their digital counterparts, on art production itself, on the diversity of individuality (including its loss), on the mechanisms of today's economy and - last but not least - on the seductive power of the mass. The pixel paintings seem to work on all possible layers of interpretation: on the representational as well as on the formal level, which is so closely connected to the medium Anne Peschken and Marek Pisarsky chose to work with. And thereby, the notions of originality, individual creativity and industrialized art production - inherent to the very concept of "Globalpix" - are also drawn into question. The multi-textured meaning generated by multi-texturally woven canvases does not in the least make a threadbare or worn out impression – much to the contrary it evokes broad semantic fields at the pulse of our time, illustrating how important a present-day perspective is for (de)constructing the past.

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