Art Discourse

The Delicate Mix between Technology, Politics and Aesthetics

Interview with Daniel G. Andújar

Geert Lovink

Interview – April 26, 2016

In April 2015 I had the honour to receive a private tour by the Spanish artist Daniel G. Andújar of his solo show, *Operating System*, at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid. [1] I know Daniel from the net.art days of 1996–1997 when he was running *Technologies To The People*® (TTTP) (1996), a work shared in *Operating System*. All these months later, as the works in the show stayed with me, I decided to contact Daniel and request an e-mail interview with him. What I appreciate in his work is the natural way in which his 'new media arts' background is woven into the broader visual arts context of a large museum such as Reina Sofía. The show brought together the real thing and its virtual double – as if the two have never been at odds. *Operating System* offered a mix of many things, such as playful net.art, a dark, hacker space installation, journalism investigating real estate projects (from the pre-2008 boom years), a colourful room filled with manipulated versions of political celebrity posters and an art historical investigation into Pablo Picasso. The exhibition seemed to find the 'tactical' equilibrium so many people have thrived on and thirsted for. When we have all moved on to become post-digital, where 'analogue is the new digital,' then why should we continue to marginalize those who experiment with the 'new material' in an evermore ironic fashion? It is time for the Great Synthesis. The historical compromise is there. Everyone prepares for the first post-digital Venice Biennale in 2017. Let's enjoy the delicate mix between technology, politics and aesthetics in such a way that none of the three dominate, and let Andújar be our guide. [2]

Dirigentes. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Individual Citizen Republic Project. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Not Found, 1000 casos de estudio. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Las colecciones. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Technologies to the People. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores
(Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Technologies to the People. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores
(Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Infiltrados. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Pablo Picasoo y Guernica. Photos by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015)

Geert Lovink: In your Reina Sofía exhibition, a large top-floor space was dedicated to controversial material related to Picasso and the making of his painting* Guernica *(1937). The material was impressive and made eminent sense in this location. I was amazed by your passionate involvement in this topic and equally the necessity to confront these ideas. Is the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War still so controversial?

Daniel G. Andújar: More than 100,000 people remain missing from the losing side of the Spanish Civil War. So the wounds have not yet healed. In my project the distortion of iconic images takes the form of a case study on Picasso (the famous painter and communist), *Guernica* (Picasso's artwork and name of the city destroyed by carpet bombing techniques developed by Germany's Condor Legion) and the 1937 *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* where *Guernica* was exhibited (the international context

during the Spanish Civil War). While *Guernica*, Picasso's most political work, is a reaction to the bombings of a Spanish village by German and Italian forces, in my project I talk about anything else but this. The room invites the viewer to reflect on a figure, a work and a historical event in several interrelated pieces in the museum collection dealing with aspects of transparency and concealment of information and intervention or non-intervention in public affairs. It also sets up analogies between historical responses to warfare and new forms of violence, siege and control in the framework of information societies. *Guernica* is the cornerstone of Spain's national collections; in the fifties the picture became a myth, but Picasso was criticized at the time by colleagues and others due to their lack of a sense for political literalness. In Paris he was ignored by a general public fascinated by Hitler's Nazi pavilion and Stalin's Soviet pavilion. The painting belongs to the Spanish Republic, not the Kingdom of Spain. *Guernica* was used to support the Republican government fighting General Francisco Franco during the war. That Picasso, a Spanish expatriate, joined the French Communist Party in 1944 and remained a loyal member to the end of his long life presents puzzling contradictions: he never returned to Spain after Franco's victory; he never had French nationality; and he never visited the United States.

The realm of political images has really exploded over the past ten years. How do you see recent visual culture, the rise of selfies and Instagram and the growing role of social media in the distribution of images? How do artists relate to the fact that they are producing like everyone else?

We have valuable artists' tools, a language, an invaluable historical legacy and an area of freedom – won by artists throughout history – that is undeniable. While the visual language is the most valuable tool of artistic practice, the 'visual' is now specifically associated with contemporary digital territory, digital entertainment, advertising and classical media. We, the artists, are not the only ones with the capacity to influence visual imagination. Indeed, I think we've lost some of that capacity. I do not say this with a sense of nostalgia, nor as a reproach. It has somehow freed us, the artists, from a heavy load, to focus on more interesting questions amid our servile functions far away from the corridors of power. Maybe it's time to stop making more noise, making images about blind adherence to authority or certain interests of capital. This does not mean to necessarily put a stop to working with images. We should think more about how these images have been constructed, what their structures are and what they mean. Search on the other side, side B, in the entrails, to understand the machinery and address it again, to turn mere documents and specific pieces of information into knowledge. The idea is to impose a kind of recycling and ecological work, giving new meaning to pollution and the vast visual landscape we know today. We enter this battle assuming responsibilities. It's time to turn things upside-down, reconsidering and questioning how we can translate and read in this new context. It's time to discover what is behind these images, decode their teaching, help open up the visual framework codes, reveal what is behind all of this, exhibit the innards. It is a language that is full of capabilities, but immersed in a battle for control. Language can change the world, or it should. And this ability is one of the most effective tools in the artist's studio.

Can you define what a political image is these days? Which skills can we develop to create them?

Democracy has become a matter of aesthetics. The stage of the public has become a sort of orchestrated video game or operetta with a few recited parts: an operetta performed daily before a public overwhelmed by the consequences of the crisis. The text acritically acclaims a fake pre-established script: frivolous, affected, and ridiculous, where the audience is immediately proscribed by mass media and thus defused before its fellow citizens should they dare boo from the stands. This is the criminalization of protest, which

we believe leads to the brutalization of audiences, a brutalization implemented by refined political techniques upon audiences that dare practice disobedience of the rules imposed by the theatrical institution through transgression, insubordination, the creation of new political experiences or the rehearsal of new voices. Political technique is immersed in a sort of pre-constructed and managed video game where players build, expand or administer fictitious communities or projects with limited resources, where the rules of the game are predetermined and opportunely interrupted. It is a kind of perfectly defined and mathematically established computer game where every movement and strategy, the rules, the architecture, the characters and their movements and temperaments, even the space itself, are reduced to a mere code: a set of ones and zeros known only to its creators, who manipulate each of the players' (e)motions at will.

However, before this revolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), Michel Foucault had warned that discourse is controlled, selected and distributed by a certain number of procedures designed to invoke powers and dangers, to dominate random events and avoid their frightening materiality. It's almost as if these video games recreated environments and situations of social conflict in which citizens think they control one or more characters (or any other element in this environment) to fulfil one or more objectives with specific rules they cannot modify. It is like *The Matrix* – among the references that evoke the cave in Plato's *The Republic* – where inner life itself is colonized, the body is exploited and experience is captured. Therefore we must make artistic practice into a sample of 'resistance': a model that intends to stubbornly remain in hierarchic spatial relationships that are increasingly diffuse, global and standardized. We must emerge through the current structure to make way for these changes. Art thusly acquires a political function that requires clear ethical positions. Like any other cultural process, art is basically a process of transmission, transfer, continuity – permanent and utterly necessary dialogue. However, lest we forget, it also means transgression, rupture, irony, parody, appropriation, alienation, confrontation, investigation, exploration, call and response. Seek out the best context that allows for developing this idea in more optimal conditions. And if this context is not available, we will have to create it. We can create structures that influence our perceptions of reality.

Over the past eight years, Spain has gone through a severe economic crisis. How did it affect your work? In the decade before 2008 a lot of new art institutions were founded. What should happen next? Can we speak of a cultural policy of Podemos? Or should we rather focus on self-organization?

The truth is that we develop our work in a very specific, singular and unstable environment that is unpredictable, precarious, poorly paid, part-time, unprotected, short-term, unsustainable and risky. The reality lies in our practice, in an area of weakness in terms of the distribution of forces. The 'system' highlights our limited capacity to influence. This feature is certainly the logical result of cultural policy, pedagogy and social habits that show some interest in the cultural sector in general. While it happens elsewhere, we can say that in the Spanish context the arts (or culture in general) has been understood as a mere rhetorical device, a single element of political manipulation, a quirk of the *nouveau riche*, somewhat assimilated and therefore dispensable as the 'general interest.' Nobody seems to question, especially in the political arena, that culture is a matter of some importance, though none seem to explain exactly why. The state itself has trouble recognizing the essential role of the arts in our cultural system. In good economic times and speculative binge promises, tacit agreements were made, the result of intense negotiations that catered to historical claims. We were negotiated with and assigned codes of good practice in the sector, based on the implementation and monitoring of sectorial or self-regulation agreements. We also spoke of the assumption of public administration taking a more active role in the monitoring and implementation of issues regarding the status of the artist: social security, copyrights and intellectual property,

training, career transitions, risk and working conditions, contracts, binding agreements in collective recognition of trade unions, and professional associations. The museums and public institutions agreed to make a special effort, with the indispensable help of state and regional agencies and their expertise in exporting and disseminating production projects. Efforts to improve the regulation of art instruction in line with other neighbouring countries were opened. We also made promotional and participation plans for our artists with respect to the international context, and we speculated endlessly about new economic models for culture.

Today we feel cheated, like many sectors of society, and feel forced to make claims and demands. One issue is the rightful claim that we need to work together to define and adopt practical measures and implementation frameworks to instil good practices in publicly funded institutions and communities for art so we might better serve our audiences. Citizens (whose capabilities have been almost reduced to those of mere consumers) are unleashing forces which will 'flatten' governments, creating a new civil society. We are constantly redefining the spheres of influence, which will lead to inevitable misunderstandings and confrontations. The demand for public space is a historical constant undergoing constant redefinition; it is a matter of remaining vigilant when facing new challenges, as well as finding new ways for society to express itself with absolute freedom. At the moment we are working in a very tight space, subject to constant pressure; it is a space which needs to be expanded. When that happens, the tension between the expansion of the creative space and the forces of constriction will become untenable. We must assume responsibility. Visual artists, as a group, cannot take refuge in the role of mere servants in established cultural structures, defending impossible positions. Those of us who work in the field of art must help introduce the necessary transformations such that the essential structures of art institutions may be modified, destroying their foundations if necessary and turning the ruins into our castle. We must work together, putting our shoulders to the wheel, in an unstoppable collective process.

We want to believe that our political context is changing. We are undoubtedly experiencing the reformulation of the processes for production, transmission, and appropriation of symbolic goods, leading us to question given models of the construction of subjectivity and social organization. We must use the tools available to us to enable citizens to take part in distributed networks not susceptible to political control, as well as combining (by using a range of technologies) the deliberative and participative elements, which appear to be incompatible with previous models.

How do you look back at the net.art period around 1996–1997? A few years ago you wrapped up the TTTP project. You have moved on from there while incorporating a lot of the cultural values of the new media / tactical activism time in your current work. It doesn't feel you have made many compromises. How did you find the balance between hardcore tech and smooth visuals?

I definitely made too many compromises. But let me say that I do not feel like I've moved too much. For me, the emergence of new information and communication tools, the extension of networks and the Internet represented an extension of public space. Public space forms the basis on which I operate as an artist and so I reflect on and formulate questions about it. As said before, reclaiming public space is a historical constant that is continually being redefined; it is necessary to expand our space, and to do so we must be very alert to proceedings directed toward limiting the use and enjoyment of these free spaces.

Sometimes it is a question of the tools or techniques you use. In the eighties I was part of the new video art generation and in the nineties a member of the net.art ghetto. I continue to be interested in exposing the configurations of power, convinced that the practice of art

should establish mechanisms for social relations that help insure its impact in the long-term and allow the discourse to be moved beyond the restricted confines of the art audience and the institution of art itself.

All of my art projects are based on collaborative research into political, historical, social and cultural phenomena and their media representations in a critical way: body politics, corruption, censorship, xenophobia, urban developments, cultural industry, and the inclusion and exclusion of technologies, to name a few. We have to demonstrate our ethical commitment with the work we do, incorporating it into the process that develops what constitutes our social, political and cultural context.

In 1996 I created TTTP as a vehicle, in the form of a licensed corporation, for reflecting on the promises and cynicism toward, as well as the potential of, new technologies in an ironic and critical way. For a long time TTTP served as a sort of stage and masquerade (I wouldn't say 'fake') that I used to enact double bind and ambiguous situations. TTTP came about as a project precisely in concert with the Street Access Machine for *Discord: Sabotage of Realities*, an exhibition at the Kunstverein and the Kunsthaus in Hamburg, 1996–1997. It was the moment when the Internet was being introduced into the domestic sphere and the technology bubble was beginning to take shape. The project aimed to stress the fact that this new utopia of freedom and global access to information and knowledge could vanish. The idea of a liberating technology and the Internet to become a more democratic space was nothing more than an optimistic dream that appeared unattainable. We had little historic ground for an objective perspective of the changes, but we were witnessing the flowering of a new conception of power that had become immaterial with the loss of its grounding in material resources. We were witnessing a battle for control over knowledge – above all, of information – a fight for and against its being managed as a lucrative distribution and circulation monopoly. We can see this more clearly today.

The current crisis is yet another consequence of the general mobilization in the battle for markets, resources and spheres of influence. This new episode reveals the power and repercussions of the new economy. We stand before a digitally connected market whose control mechanisms have contributed to the design of a new geography of power, to diminishing state authority and citizens' rights. We go on conducting business there, we adapt and rectify, but essentially we work within the same received parameters. I work between the small spaces of liberty we are allowed, using the system's failures, sneaking through the gaps before they are closed up for good.

The Web, as a public space, is also determined by social and power relationships, and a system of negotiation quite similar to that of cities. By contrast, the spaces marked off for developing artistic practices are specially designed, the result of a historical evolution with the aim of creating a base for structuring and managing artistic language. It is a specific, restricted and protected space for a highly defined cultural process. As artists we should invest much more in its management, evolution and transformation, or we should abandon it once and for all, in which case its function will remain limited and subservient to the service and entertainment industries. As regards the media, the traditional media – radio, television and print media – these can no longer continue to support themselves as fundamental pillars of a structure that has been foundering for some time; it has already had its turn and its methods are being contended. Unilateral, closed, defined discourses that do not offer an opportunity for response, participation or collective management are no longer acceptable.

A solo exhibition in a major international museum, that's really something for any artist, let alone for a political person with a digital new media background. You escaped the ghetto. Is that a correct way of looking at your success? Did it perhaps work out because you decided to hold onto your art destiny? You did not walk to the other side and

become an academic. Are you an early bird? What do you predict? Will the tension between the contemporary art scene and the digital world finally be resolved?

Every working context is conditioned in a different way. The conditions for reading the situations are different, and as such, expressing which practice to follow is also different for each case. The museum, of course, remains the point of reference for art practice; it is subject to a complex system of relationships and ongoing negotiations. Art is also a process of necessary dialogue and, as discussed earlier, must be a sign of 'resistance' to a model that intends to remain in a space of increasingly hierarchical, diffuse, global and standardized relationships. This strategic distance is critical with respect to power, as art has a political function requiring clear ethical positions. I want to get away from unilateral discourses that afford no possibility for response. The projects reproduce processes that normally imply a certain level of complexity that we should not seek to conceal. Formulating questions is a very important part of artistic praxis. There is neither a defined format nor a specific project in the strict sense. We speak broadly of tools, platforms, archives and educational processes. The spaces are thought out in terms of their transformative capacity and not merely as functional structures. They are platforms for constructing meanings and producing significance, designed as mechanisms for criticizing hierarchy and the possibility of enabling tools and the means of production to modify the reality that constructs new subjectivities. We are trying to define a specific context that allows us to learn how to learn – managing knowledge through managing the performance space itself.

My generation, unlike that of the seventies which confronted institutions only to finally be assimilated by them, must try to transform our institutions. It is undeniable that museums face a challenge not without paradoxes or contradictions: for instance, the fact that they must physically exist as a place and promote cultural initiatives set in a representational form that is becoming increasingly vague. In a short space of time we have gone from visiting the museum, the library, the archive, to living within the archive, a noisy defective archive. We can generate and consume content very quickly, but also modify and retrieve it with the same swiftness from an enormous archive continually being created and examined. The primary transformation in the information era is the evolution of public and audience habits so that we can now speak of a new era of participation and interpretation. The audience no longer wants to be limited to receiving information. It loathes being the passive subject of cultural processes that exclude, wanting to interact with these new media, participate in the process of transmitting information, and be an active part of this information's evolution and transformation into knowledge. Systems of representation and diffusion use immaterial networks, which, however, inevitably require a physical vessel, a real space in which to produce and convey information.

The concept of permanence is becoming harder to maintain, whilst that of hybrid and temporary zones in which people can get together to speak, work, and even celebrate things can, in turn, dissolve into a social group, moving from one group to another, forming new groups. We must accept these contradictions, for example, of a cultural process which requires time in the face of frantic social and technological developments. As with libraries, the spaces devoted to the visual arts must become places in which to generate knowledge, as well as manage, produce, display, and share information, rather than merely storing or arranging objects in cabinets. They must become media centres / laboratories / resources familiar with contemporary uses of ICTs. As an open space, with communication between tactical and independent social structures, they can service the world of academia and theoretical studies, contemporary art practices and experimentation: the things that belong 'here' and 'there.' In this sense, they must be a means rather than an end.

Talking about the art world versus the digital world, I think my artistic practice has been based on the rereading, re-appropriation and re-contextualization of existing audio-visual

material for a number of years. To get this material I used all the tools at my disposal. I'm not interested in debates that are just about tools. I try to know them, through practice. There are artists who use photography or painting and then there are people that take photos and they call themselves photographers and they organize festivals of photography. That's okay. We are still engaged in a process of digitization that is transferring a good part of our visual legacy from its formal physical format to a digital one. All of this information is being placed in containers located on a new plane near the public space with high visibility and accessibility. This circumstance generates a new, saturated, ornate, and noisy visual panorama, creating a new landscape that will modify our relationships with our imaginaries. We can see a clear break in the linear guidelines of experiencing time and space, as well as in concepts such as authorship or intellectual and industrial property. We are witnessing a re-examination of individual and collective identities, based on new contexts of diversity and the multicultural, resulting in a crisis in the classic systems of representation and the model of cultural reproduction associated with the nation-state. We have seen a change in certain processes of collective working and learning with the emergence of a kind of meritocratic hierarchy based on individual effort working for the collective good and those person-to-person relations that are helping to create one of the greatest collective areas for exchange, innovation and creation ever seen in the history of humankind outside the sphere of public institutions. These models are continually being redefined. Fortunately, current information and communication technologies have created a new framework for action, in which previous situations and new scenarios develop, of which artists can take advantage. And it is not about the disciplines or tools we use to do it.

Your recent show in Basel is called* Zones of Conflict*, 2015. This sounds very contemporary, with wars happening everywhere, the Euro crisis in Greece and the flow of refugees. What can we see there?

The HeK (House of Electronic Arts) exhibition showed works that address conflict – here understood as conflict situations where the interests or the ideas of individuals, social groups or governmental organizations diverge. The eighteen works that were assembled tell of conflicts, complex power interests that defy clear classification, in which images and media technologies are used to control these interests and to further expand hegemonies. What is crucial to me is the relationship between reality and its representation or simulation in digital worlds, the issues of power structures in social systems, and the use of technologies as instruments of government or social control. Both new and previously made works were on view. People could find projects from the mid-nineties to 2015. At the entrance was *Access to Technology Is a Human Right*™, one of the first corporate slogans I used in 1996 with TTTP. It was in the company of other works that question instrumentalization for speculative ends and / or the social control of communication technologies, triggering the need for us to gain awareness of the dangers and paradoxes of the emancipatory discourse that has been constructed around them. The more recent piece included was *Capital. The Commodity. The Drug.* (2015), a wall installation with 514 images: the work is the result of intensive visits I paid to the so-called *darknet*, the depths of the uncensored and anonymous Internet. I procured access to networks where illegal goods are traded. A virtual space is shown that has developed beyond what the law permits and thus creates a parallel world in which different power arrangements apply. For these projects I infiltrated one of these forums over several weeks, trying to trade with every type of illegal materials (false banknotes, drugs, all kinds of services). I dealt with criminals, extortionists and an insulting number of pederasts.

In other works I address the civil disobedience that takes place in the analogue realm. An aspect of this is the simulacrum, which reverberates in the visual construction of the policeman as a demonstrator in *Infiltrators* (2014) in relation to video game technologies, or in *Armed Citizen* (1998–2006) and *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (2014), which refer to the limits of technology. *Armed Citizen* presents a series of handguns, freely available

online, as objects of desire, whereas the latter makes oblique reference to early Russian avant-garde interests in design as a political weapon, and juxtaposing it with the current possibility of using 3D printing to make a weapon. The interplay between reality and its representations in connection with conflicts also plays a decisive role in my 'war' works. Like in *The War, Honor* (2006), a piece from my well-known project *Postcapital Archive* (1989–2001) it not only demonstrates the similarity of the virtual and real worlds of war but, more importantly, makes the imagery of war itself a subject of discussion.

Tell us about your future plans. Is the Reina Sofía exhibition going to travel?

Generally, I do not like to encapsulate the projects. I like to adapt them to specific contexts. There must be mediation with the curator and location. In any case some pieces and projects have subsequently travelled to HeK in Basel, The School of Kyiv for the Kyiv Biennial in 2015, and you can see part of the *Guernica* intervention in *Remake Resnais*, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville, 2015–2016. I am participating in several projects and exhibitions: *Global Control and Censorship*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2015–2016; *The Beast and is the Sovereign*, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2015–2016); *Guilloché* as solo show in Galería Casa sin fin, Madrid, 2015; and others. In 2016, I am at artpace in San Antonio, Texas, producing a new project over three months. But before that, I work on a new project near the city of Caceres at the Museo Vostell Malpartida around the context of the place and personality of German painter and sculptor Wolf Vostell, an early adopter of video art and environment / installation work and a pioneer of the happening and Fluxus. It is a nice project totally outside of the mainstream.

Geert Lovink is a media theorist, Internet critic and author of *Social Media Abyss* (2016), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), *Zero Comments* (2007) and *Dark Fiber* (2002). Since 2004 he is researcher in the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences where he is the founder of the Institute of Network Cultures. His centre recently organized conferences, publications and research networks such as *Video Vortex* (the politics and aesthetics of online video), *Unlike Us* (alternatives in social media), *Critical Point of View* (Wikipedia), *Society of the Query* (the culture of search), *MoneyLab* (Internet-based revenue models in the arts) and a project on the future of art criticism. From 2004–2013 he was also associate professor in Media Studies (new media), University of Amsterdam. Since 2009 he is professor at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee / Malta) where he supervises PhD students.

Text: originally edited by Henry Warwick.

Footnotes

1. For more on the Reina Sofía show visit www.museoreinasofia.es.
2. For more on Daniel G. Andújar's work visit www.danielandujar.org.

Tags

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