

Laptopia (#5)

Utopia, Aesthetics, Liberation

Traditionally, somewhat romantically, the artist is perceived as a solitary figure who works for itself and on its own, specifically within the artistic practice and, more generally, within certain aspects in his/ her life. Gathering several artists in one space to create a collective artwork is therefore, naturally, a double challenge for both artist and curator. Moreover, as a sound exhibition, some of Laptopia's conditions further problematize the overall presentation of the art. Conditions such as the unique architecture of the museum, its being one circular space, undivided by any separating walls, as well as the basic fact that working with sound as a raw material for the artwork is by essence abstract, diffusive and difficult to demarcate. These conditions therefore inspired unique interest in the question of utopia as a social matter (as reflected through the artistic practice) that is simultaneously objective and subjective; objective for every society and subjective to Laptopia in its inquiry into the possibility of utopian creation within society.

The curatorial work dealing with the feasibility of utopian creation within society required, on top of choosing the artists, minimal intervention and consisted of a limited number of instructions. The first request from the artists was to create a sound installation that will refer directly to the museum's space, taking into consideration – and understanding – its unique geometrical structure. The geometrical conditions of the museum's space fundamentally affect (almost) every acoustic behavior, yet, we aspired to turn this disadvantage into an advantage, by an additional, subsequent act. The second request demanded that the works will engage with the concept of utopia. The third and final request placed to each artist was to give and receive information from another work included in the exhibition, regardless of the distance or proximity between the two works' location in the actual space. We instructed the artists to address the other work in a way that will interweave the two artworks – so that the other work will become an integral part of their work. This request created a-priori dependence between the artists who had to complete their own works in the space of the museum. The work process turned into a "live" shared dynamics that took place shortly before the opening. This act of informative, harmonic conjunction also undoes the artists' inclination (and sound artists specifically) toward introversion, and was meant first and foremost to oblige the artists to deal with the theoretical idea of the possibility of utopian creation within society and its fulfillment in an exhibition.

Theodor Adorno, a philosopher, sociologist and musicologist, who was a founding member of the Frankfurt School, theorized our understanding of society in his book *Sound Figures*.¹ To him, it is impossible to think about society either as a collection of facts or as a superior logical category. Society is a process – it creates itself and its sub-divisions, “fusing” them together up to the point of totality. From this aspect, totality can be considered in utopian terms.

Another central aspect that is predominant in the concept of utopia is the employment of technology under the aesthetic layer – Laptopia = Laptop + Utopia. The laptop represents a platform on which work, music, and the creation of contemporary artworks take place. This art, similarly to other fields of global society, is determined by the possibility of mobility, minimization, technologization, and “Cut and paste” – possibilities of action with destructive outcomes resulted solely by humans. From this perspective man is theoretically capable of preventing this kind of destruction in the future and of undoing these hypothetical actions. This undoing is utopian by essence, utopian because of enabling the sowing of the theoretical seeds that estranged man from nature and the natural. This situation leads to the second issue this exhibition confronts, which is the meaning of the aesthetic dimension, based on technology, in this societal utopia. Generally speaking, the aesthetic dimension possesses a power drawn from our admiration of beautiful objects. The mechanism of suspension followed by admiration is, so it seems, unique to mankind. In different disciplines of knowledge the aesthetic dimension acquires its significance out of a defined place, but an aesthetic dimension that can be perceived as a neutral space presents a raw potential to facilitate a reaching out towards utopian ideas or the fulfillment, to a certain extent, of a ‘new’ social being for the 21st century. As such, an aesthetic dimension based on sound can accomplish this most efficiently. Sound and music are understood by many as more abstract than visual art, for example. We evoke this comparison to visual art because it enables us to solidify different aesthetic ideas by examining its reference to sound. A first physical reduction will paradoxically point out precisely the opposite assumption – a visual (material) representation of sound waves propagation in the air is easier to conceptualize than a similar representation of light waves – we can therefore claim that light waves are more abstract than sound waves. In fact, however, upon sensual experimentation – the situation is reversed – shapes are understood more easily than sounds, they maintain a stronger eye-object relation than ear-object, and therefore visual art that takes place in space is considered by many as more tangible – you can touch a shape but not a sound.

Perceiving a space that is external to the subject is more efficient, it seems, than an internal time perception, upon evaluating abstractness. Moreover, unlike visual art’s employment of different

¹ *Klangfiguren. Musikalische Schriften I.* (Berlin, Frankfurt a.M. 1959)

images in its coming to being, sound is positioned closer to the abstract on the “abstract-figurative” axis (it is possible to evoke musical language and its images vis-à-vis the visual image that lends itself to the eye, but musical raw materials are not as tangible as the visual ones). In addition the different sounds we encounter on a daily basis are much closer in their nature to randomness and chaos than to patterns, stability, or consistency.

That said, the aesthetic dimension of sound seems to possess the strongest capacity to push the artwork towards the domains of utopia; most theoretical debates about sound art address the question of utopia for a good reason. Hence, sound as an aesthetic dimension enables us to move towards the possibility of fulfilling a utopian creation in society. The aesthetic dimension is interconnected (whether we like it or not) with other dimensions of the human society. The present attempt of the exhibition to turn the utopian bowl on its head may be a naïve effort, but it is at least an effort. In the situation of oppression and social exploitation that we witness everyday it is not a trivial matter. The possibility of setting free from this situation is the most basic and humane hope we are left with in society as well as the foundation of Laptopia.

The significance of art (being a fulfillment of the aesthetic) as an apparatus for changing reality is gently and concisely addressed by Herbert Marcuse in his 1978 book *The Aesthetic Dimension*.² To him, roughly speaking, art contains elements that contradict societal reality and one of its goals is to signal an alternative to the present state as an infinite process. The negative elements of art are presented by the aesthetic form and are inherently connected to aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic form is perceived as a revolutionary element, which is efficient in the artistic frame, rather than being an exception to socio-political concepts that will devalue it. This perception postulates the aesthetic dimension within a distinct place in the utopian aspiration.

Laptopia, as a model of society, inherently contains the slick mechanism of the system, of advertising culture, of the oppression and exploitation of what exists out of its boundaries. In this aspect it is no longer utopian, it is rather a place (or a non-place) that follows the same merciless rules that exist outside. The artists who exhibit in Laptopia are confined with shackled. They strive to minimize the damage, but cannot be truly free, given the oppressive state of affairs. They do not enjoy artistic license even on the technological level, being dependent in their works on the information they receive and transmit to other artists and from their own artworks. In fact, if the artists and the audience will look on themselves or on their neighbors, they will not be able to see the full picture and will not be aware of being interconnected, creating an infinite informative loop. The narrowing of the gaze becomes a requisite. How could this requisite

² *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978).

change? Is a release from the current situation possible? And if so, how? Is utopia, even a partial one, at all possible? Can technological means and their contingent representation, the laptop, help in some way? Will it ever be possible to answer one (or all) of these questions? It is hard to say. But even if the possibility of the impossible is absurd, the capacity to imagine such a possibility is what matters.

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