

## **РЕ-КОМПОЗИЦИЯ**

Автор, медия и произведение  
в епохата на дигиталното  
възпроизводство



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**Красимир Терзиев**

Институт за съвременно изкуство — София  
Издателство Изток-Запад

София, 2012

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София, 2012

ISBN

на корицата: Херман Жуйгнер. *Без название (Seascape VII)*, 2011  
с разрешение на автора

*Настоящото издание е вариант на докторска дисертация по Културна антропология в катедра „Теория и история на културата“, Философски факултет на Софийския университет „Св. Кирил и Методи“; защитена през януари 2012 година.*

*Благодарности към:*

*научния ми ръководител проф. Ивайло Дичев, за търпението и напътствията; доц. Александър Късов, за безценните предварителни коментари и препоръки по текста; на доц. Даниела Колева за коментарите по време на вътрешната защита на катедрата; на рецензентите проф. Ирина Генова, проф. Светослав Кокалов, проф. Боян Манчев; на Яра Бубнова за това, че ме подкрепи и амбицира текстът да се публикува; на Кирил Прашков за съветите при подготовката и форматирането на книгата.*

*Благодарности към всички художници, които дадоха съгласието си за публикуване на документацията от техни проекти: Ханс Бернхард и lizvix (Ubertomorgen), Херман Жийгнер, Правдолюб Иванов, Даниела Костова, Броди Кондън, Гутри Лонерган, Майкъл Мандибере, Ева и Франко Матес (0100101110101101.org), Иван Мудов, Джон Рафтан, Калин Серапионов.*

Авторът

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## Summary

The present study traces the process of dematerialisation and fragmentation of what is commonly referred to as art work, or else, all processes and artefacts at the heart of artistic practices in contemporary visual arts, ruled on the one hand by technological advancements in production and sharing of images, and on the other – by changes in the attitude to the very definition of art. Specifically, the focus is on issues those processes pose to traditional notions such as original, copy and their related matters of space, time, media, in turn leading on to positioning author and audience. The context of the present study are visual arts and by no means does it refer to art per se, both for limitations in the researcher's expertise and, more substantially, for the distinctive differences in the relationship between art work and materiality of the artistic expression across fields: it varies from literature to music, either of those are distinguishable from the position in performing arts, etc.

Chapter One studies the background of the constructions original and copy, as well as various half-tones between positive and negative connotations in the duality's references across history. Landmark essay by Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has been assumed as key to interpretation of the problem, as it argues with astuteness and thoroughness on the change in the field of authenticity – the aura of the art work, driven by the first wave of mechanical reproduction technologies – photography and film. We plot the script here, developed in further detail in the study – the eventual decline in the hierarchical distinction between original and copy grounded in the development of the media. While in the age of print, photography and film it is still relevant to distinguish original (manuscript, photographic negative, film master copy etc) from distribution copies, with mass introduction of digital technologies the latter differentiation is increasingly impossible to make. As Boris Groys determines irrevocably, the presentation of any digital content is about the performance (visualisation) of

a specific machine code. In the process of the visualisation each presentation (any performative instance of a digital copy) contextualised within a certain framework, bears the features of an original<sup>1</sup>. Following the same logic, in the absence of distinction between original and copy the socialisation of art works and artistic practices in general are faced with the challenge of being coherently perceived at any and all institutional levels without having to return to an out of date, inefficient set of tools. This is a particularly poignant issue for, albeit obsoleted in the area of the practices themselves, the categories are still widely used in popular media, market and legal vocabularies.

Chapter Two studies in greater detail and scrutiny the epistemological category aura of the art work, and traces the replacement which has occurred in the locus of the term – from the authenticity of the material object, through the figure of the author to the figure of the perceiver(s). The changes in the author-function by age and discourse within which it is located is also traced here, following Foucault. Analysis by Foucault and Bart reveal the author as much as challenging power as warranty of meaning<sup>2</sup>. And yet, the author is also owner of the capital of his/her own intellectual work, leading to the assumption of the art work as property, and the discrepancies among regulations on authors' rights, intellectual property and copyright crisis policies. This chapter is key to the construction and composition of the study for it is here that the interdependencies of the various categories featuring art practices are discussed.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the entire conceptual cloud <sup>4</sup> of institutional notions by which art identifies itself has disintegrated since the loss of traditional groundings of the categories original – copy. For it is impossible to reflect on the theory and history of the art of modernity without referring to the authors' intentions and manifests, the aura of technique and material, the authenticity of expression, the issue of legacy, the artistic value and its transcendence. To quote again Alexander Kiossev, "these are all inter-related categories, in a common conceptual cloud, linked with soft systemic bonds, so whenever

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1 Boris Groys, *From Image to Image File – and back: Art in the age of digitalization*, in: *Art Power*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008, c. 85.

2 Ivaylo Dichev, *The Fragmentation of the Author* online. In: Lilova, D. (ed) *Professionals and Amateurs Online*, Seminar\_BG, 6, 2011, <<http://www.seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy6.html>> [10.12.2011].

3 I am indebted to Prof. Alexander Kiossev for directing my attention to this particular point of the knot of objects and processes, followed in the book.

4 Another term I owe to Prof. Alexander Kiossev from our discussions of an early stage of this text.

anything begins to occur with a single category, it effects change in all the rest.”

Chapter Three dwells on the transformation of the art work in the conditions of global connectivity and media convergence. The aurathetic art work which in the age of European romanticism became subject to substantial, comprehensive theories, in the age of late modernity, mass culture and serial reproduction has, on the one hand, been alienated from the magic touch of the artist's hand to become more of an industrial product or symbolic gesture in the complex semiotic play of signs; and on the other – with artistic production and distribution there is an ever growing shift towards broad audiences – warranty for the author's success and the legitimacy of the museum institution, but also for the integration of artistic practices in the social process. The development of image capture technologies marks the beginning of a crisis in classification of art works traditionally linked to their material medium and production technique. Nowadays, both in art education and exhibition activities the crisis is especially pronounced. It relates to the proliferation of the terminological labelling from early modernism to date, and to the reference to non-material practices such as performance, action, situation, installation etc., as well as the development of new hybrid forms under the shared descriptor installation which though could well refer to a large variety of forms. The issue becomes all the graver with the introduction of digital technologies into art, when the distinction between the popular application of the media and its usage within an art context becomes ever more difficult. In summary, while 18th c. aesthetic theories define art as specialised expertise in the area of the beauty based on the myth of the lost and rediscovered (re-written) Antiquity, according to contemporary art practices, to rephrase the title of one of the three leitmotifs of the latest Documenta 12<sup>5</sup> – modernity is the new antiquity. In effect this means that along with the stability of its autonomous institutions, and following the myths and utopia of early avant-garde, contemporary art spans across a vast social area and is no longer merely a matter of aesthetics. This has resulted in a broader art field of relational practices which rather than identifying their form by means of any given materiality, technique, method or medium, seek for key social relationships within art works and this increasingly leads to events.

Chapter Four reviews the panorama of artistic approaches to

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5 Documenta 12 (2007) includes Documenta 12 magazines – a network of over 90 periodicals in the field of arts worldwide. The three leitmotifs of documenta 12 are: *Is modernity our antiquity?*, *What is bare life?* and *What is to be done (Education)?* See <<http://magazines.documenta.de/>> [11.11.2011].

the techno-media, from the art world's resolve on autonomy, through the interventions and tactical applications of the mass media, to the attempted transformation from within and the creation of art initiatives for alternative media. Nicolas Bourriaud suggests here a nuanced view of the relationship between art and technology by defining the law of relocation according to which art exercises its critical responsibility onto technology only when it manages to shift/alter its challenges. Consequently authors who have managed to immerse deep into the structure of technologies and reveal the principles by which they create social interactions would not be those who use the same technologies as production method. My attempted typology here aims to realign well known groupings, trends and sequences of events and authors, described by my predecessor art researchers, into a new classification along the axis of analysing the correlation between art and techno media. I argue that this axis is sufficiently relevant for typological purposes for since the Situationist International the issue of the machine reproducing social relations through fabricated images remains key to the orientation of art practices. This axis aligns the various positions according to the relevance of the aesthetic, the authorship and community engagement, to public call for action and transforming the passive viewer into a *viveur*,<sup>6</sup> to the preservation of the autonomy of the field juxtaposed to the abandonment of autonomy, and immersion into the broad field of civil activism, using free artistic techniques and methods.

The final Chapter Five dwells on the comparative analysis between net art – folkloric by nature – and the professional art scene. Crediting once more to Alexander Kiossev for pointing me to this, I shall study here a paradox this particular comparison reveals. Led by Guy Debord situationsists maintain that the very notion of autonomy in art needs to be abandoned as a bourgeois anachronism, and that their radical revolution practice, however related to art, still needs to be perceived beyond it, as live experience alone. Despite this view Debord's films are all full of references. Instead of visualising his manifestos through other than inherited images he therefore needs their appropriation to ground his critique of the show. Appropriation art in the 1980-s follows a similar path of assumption of the radically different. As mentioned earlier in reviewing the appropriation of advertising images by Richard Prince, after the initial radical gesture the images are seen to end as fetishes, no different from the object of criticism, with colossal amounts bid for them at secondary

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6 The term belongs to Guy Debord. Translated from french it means *The one who lives*. See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. 1967, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>> [24.09.2011].

art markets. Similarly, when describing contemporary artists, despite having accepted the death of the author and the deconstruction of the original as historic facts, the art institutions frequently bring back to life expressions like insuperable, unique, high value etc.

Remix culture looks like free of charge dematerialised culture for all. The unprecedented by scale net art echoes the utopian ambitions manifested by various artistic avant-garde on democratisation of aesthetic experiences, the participation of the audience in the creative process, the free transfer of cultural objects and contents between contexts, the abandonment of genre, form or expression limitations, between the codes for high and low culture, in brief – between art and life. Seemingly where avant-garde has failed today's techno-media succeed. Except that these dematerialised cultural objects (having once headed for the avant-garde strategy of resistance) in the longer run turn out to be perfectly adapted to the post-Fordist phase of capitalism and new economies – the norm against which opposition is originally aimed at. This in fact is the next paradox that surfaces in the comparative analysis between professional art practices and amateur online creativity. Capitalism, in its current phase of globalised cashflows travelling at the speed of light and hard to trace, prioritises compressed experience over contemplation, intensity over immersion, easy access and spontaneous participation over restriction, compatibility over exclusivity, the temporary ethereality of digital visualisation over the durability of material objects.

Online art is commonly spread. But it is art that is predefined by designated menus, modules, widgets, buttons, links, protocols, formats, codecs; by online platforms each of which rationalises its own model of production and communication; by standards which compress the media substance to achieve maximum transfer rates; by the dynamics of participation which prioritises compressed experience over contemplation, intensity over immersion, easy access over control, compatibility over exclusivity. Creativity and participation have become key notions of the decade's culture. This however is a problem for that part of the art world which insists on autonomy and exclusivity in the spirit of modernism. Artists, institutions and markets are seeking for ways to distinguish between the field and popular culture. In this process the durability of the material and the charisma of by now redundant analogue media suddenly gain new value.

Along with the search for markers of singularity though the art world is also attracted to the potential of the internet to generate new audiences and like-minded people. Museum institutions are lured by the idea as much as they are obliged to address the Web 2.0 phenomenon in their practice. The

convergence though is still superficial. In effect it takes place more like a reality show where all activity is pre-scripted in order to be cashed in, and the opportunity for real participation still remains utopian.

In her article *The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents*<sup>7</sup> Claire Bishop addresses the phenomenon of the increasing number of public engagement art practices and the inclusion of the community in the artistic process. In this essential and quite controversial text she tries to find criteria for reflecting and assessment beyond the currently dominating polarised receptions:

On the one hand there are the non-believers (the aesthetes who consider these practices to be marginal, inaccurately targeted, lacking any and all art value) and the believers (activists who reject [any] aesthetic issues as synonymous to cultural hierarchy or markets.)<sup>8</sup>

Bishop looks for a third way and joining her in her quest I would like to articulate here my own position on the topic. Assertion of the dominant role of the aesthetic in the formation of art practices would abolish the entire history of avant-garde, it would bring us to a world of formalism and polished, clean surfaces without any relevance to contemporary context. This would even out any distinction between visual arts and design, fashion, or all those cosmetic simulacra life-style industry has on offer. On the other hand, the actual obliteration of this art field's characteristics as argued in favour of by some activist fractions and the reduction of aesthetic experience in political and socially engaging collective activities, i.e. the actual obliteration of the and between art and life would be just as disastrous as any of the avant-garde's former attempts were, according to Habermas.<sup>9</sup> Avant-gardists may have attempted to abandon the art world, and to reform life, but they have not succeeded in affecting any of the other autonomous areas modern society is grounded upon — science, law and art. Therefore if we do not wish to find ourselves in a pre-modern situation in which folklore and collective creation and recreation of myths form the major part of creativity, we need to try to think aesthetically at the same time as socially and politically, try to reform inherent aesthetic categories according to the relevant current conditions, without giving up all those non-productive, controversial, negative, provocative aspects of the aesthetic.

7 See Claire Bishop, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents*. In: *ARTFORUM*, February 2006, pp. 178 — 183.

8 Ibid, p 178.

9 Jurgen Habermas, *Modernity--An Incomplete Project*, in: Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-aesthetic*, Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983, p 7.



## За автора

Красимир Терзиев е художник и изследовател, живеещ и работещ в София (роген 1969 г.). През 2012 получава докторска степен по Културна антропология към Софийския университет “Св. Климент Охридски”. От 2009 г. е преподавател в Магистърска програма “Дигитални изкуства” към Национална художествена академия “Н. Павлович”, където завършва МА, живопис, през 1997 г.

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His work has been shown at (among others): Generali Foundation, Vienna; ICA-Sofia; Kunsthalle Wien; MuHKA, Antwerp; Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest; TATE Modern, London; Renaissance Society, Chicago; The Kitchen, New York; Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart.

He received Mtel Award for Contemporary Art (special awards — with Daniela Kostova, 2011) and Ruf Award for New Bulgarian Art (2007).

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Красимир Терзиев. РЕ-КОМПОЗИЦИЯ. Автор, медия и произведение  
в епохата на дигиталното възпроизводство

Българска  
Първо издание  
София, 2012

ISBN

редактори: Диана Попова, Кирил Прашков  
превод на английски: Любов Костова  
графично оформление: iSpace.media  
печат:

Институт за съвременно изкуство – София  
Галерия ИСИ  
София, бул. В. Левски №184  
[info@ica-sofia.org](mailto:info@ica-sofia.org)  
<http://www.ica-sofia.org>

Издателство Изток-Запад  
София, кв. Яворов, бл.1, ет.1  
[iztok-zapad@abv.bg](mailto:iztok-zapad@abv.bg)  
<http://www.iztok-zapad.bg>

ISBN