

Meditation 4

On the Network Society, Globalization and Art

In connection with which other more encompassing political, economic and social forces is contemporary art developing? A nearly impossible question to answer, if simply because we should agree with Michel Foucault's observation that we cannot think beyond the barriers of our own thinking and thus cannot really see certain current developments. Nevertheless, we can argue that during the last decades our thinking and actions are becoming increasingly guided by concepts such as 'globalization' and 'networks'.

Globalization and networks. What Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as 'Empire' and Manuel Castells indicates as a 'network society' is an 'imperium' that stands out from earlier imperialisms in the fact that it does not contain a clearly traceable center (of power). The power is divided among and within supranational, 'hybrid' networks and as such can no longer be thought of as a stable system functioning upon a basis of clearly localizable (modernistic) power structures. This new, worldwide imperium is flexible, impalpable, constantly in transformation. The so-called 'global society' consists of networks of which the nodes come together in continually changing relationships. But these nodes are also 'within themselves' constantly undergoing change: identities are never completely established. In this way, a decentralized, open and dynamic network of physical, social, economic, political and cultural nodes comes into existence, having more or less frequent and more or less intense connections. Starting from such an intertwining means traversing many existing (thought) structures as well as geographic clustering and fixation.

With regard to this geographical aspect, one could say that a sort of deconstruction has taken place of the old opposition between the local and the global. Localities are always intersected by globalities; a globality is always in some way linked to a locality. Thus, globalization can not simply be thought of as a making uniform or homogenization of the world in opposition to the local where differences and heterogeneity do remain clearly distinguishable. Just like localization, globalization is a dynamic process in which identities as well as differences are being produced. Globalization 'only' makes clear that differences can no longer be considered purely geographic (local).

It should be clear that art cannot escape these ideas concerning the network society and globalization. Sociologists in particular have been indicating for a couple of decades that art is a collective activity: without all kinds of 'supporting personnel', an artist would not be able to produce a work of art or to introduce it to the public at large. The concept 'art world' arrived on the scene. For a considerable time already the necessary collaborations mentioned above exceed geographical barriers in the areas of art production and distribution ("We are the world, we are the children"), a trend which is also perceptible to different degrees within (professional art) education. The construction of temporary collaborations (which the idea of networking presupposes) was of course never limited to the jazz and pop scenes. And as for globalization: is there a single place on earth where humans have never heard of 'R & B' or Britney Spears? And what about Internet art or the distribution of art via computer networks?

Thus, it should become clear that art does not only function within a society that is characterized by concepts such as 'network' and 'globalization'. Art itself actively contributes toward the realization of all sorts of network structures without a clear or unequivocal center; art with all its production, distribution and reception strategies is an active contributor to the creation of a 'global community'.

The following thoughts can be linked to the above statements.

(1) The art world is itself a network. It would be a significant mistake to assume that the artist him/herself is located at the heart of this network. Without artist there would be no art. That much is clear. However, making art or making something into art (a quite different activity) is already, for a considerable time, not the exclusive domain of the artist. The artist is one cog in a network of people and organizations which together make possible the realization and distribution of art. To go even further, one could say that the artist as artist is in actuality produced or brought forth: by intermediaries, patrons, philosophers, and media.

(2) The artist him/herself can - as individual - be understood as a node in a network, a node in a series of *language games* within which s/he occupies a continually shifting role or position. To be an artist is no ontological category but comes into existence through a language game (context) within which this concept receives meaning and relevance. An individual is furthermore never only an artist; s/he is also consumer, offspring, citizen, etc. To use more philosophical jargon: an individual is always a contingent and conditional entity who continually, and mostly only partially or temporarily, takes a performative form. One is temporarily, within a certain context, appointed or made an artist.

(3) Artists are increasingly compelled to work together in more or less tightly knit teams. The continually more complex society (also) compels us towards farther-reaching specializations. Precisely this movement toward differentiation makes cooperation even more necessary. Paradoxically, however, this same specialization which prompts us towards cooperation simultaneously pushes us towards a measure of generalization. The choice with who, how, where, and when to work together could naturally be left to chance. But if some type of control is desired, an artist cannot avoid the fact that s/he must in some way become well versed in an essentially endless stream of supplementary disciplines, if only in order to make more well-considered decisions.

Globalization. Networks. In the same breath one could add concepts such as computers, ICT and 'distance learning'. If these can be considered a set of key words for our current juncture, the following question may no longer seem so strange: to what extent is a conservatory, as architectural unit, out of date, when 'existence' has deteriorated to 'logged in'? Logged into a computer network (webcam), a musician learns from a distance from those whom s/he would like to present her/his technical progress and creative accomplishments. On our way towards a virtual conservatory?