

Nika Oblak & Primož Novak

Reality Is Out

by Hermann Nöring

With their installations, videos and images, the Slovenian artists Nika Oblak and Primož Novak query in witty and ironical fashion the consumerism of modern capitalism and the way the media generate norms and realities. In their new piece *Reality is Out*, Oblak and Novak create a reality, which is not a complex of physical entities but rather a reductive sign. In one performance video they build and paint a sign with the word "Reality". At the end of the short performance they hold it up and issue the message to the "outside". Their sign appears within the exhibition space, whereas they themselves remain within the medial.

The duo's performance is not before an audience but rather repeats continually in film on an LCD monitor in a box. The only problem is that the sign over their heads is too large for the picture frame. By means of pneumatic mechanics it edges out of the world of 2D video and into the world of the viewer. "Reality" becomes an object and part of our three-dimensional reality, or at least of what we prefer to regard as such. Reality has however disappeared from the medial world of the performance; reality is out.

In earlier installations, Oblak and Novak already connected their performances with pneumatics, joining the virtual space of the medial to the three-dimensional space of the Real. With *The Box*, *Box 2*, *Box 3* and *Sisyphus Actions*, short film sequences are used to probe the spreading out of movement beyond the picture frame into the world of objects. As protagonists in their own films they can indeed stretch the rubber outer skin of their monitors, but they can't escape them. They remain the content of their mediums and those mediums' surfaces.

Reality is Out is the latest in a series of works characterised by machine-like, unending repetition of scenes deploying factory rhythms. Nika Oblak's and Primož Novak's humour is reflected in their works. A subtle wit is common to all their videos, images and installations, illuminating the absurdity and the blind spots of the Real in order to render cognitive understanding possible. Instead of offering solutions the artists intensify the absurdity until a means of illumination begins to emerge. Their occasionally black humour combines with the melancholic sense of being stuck in a situation with (almost) no way out.

Oblak's und Novak's work can be read according to their motto "contemporary art is nothing but a business but we take it as a joke". As artists they regard themselves as part of a social system based on unconditional consumption with a capitalist face in which media present the pursuit of maximal accumulation of material wealth as the meaning of existence. According to Guy Debord, an important reference for Oblak and Novak, consumer capitalism transforms everything into a superficial spectacle. The consumer is more or less an appendage and the passive end point of the product, whose promise of happiness already fades at the instant of purchase. But another product is always immediately available to renew the promise. In this pseudo-world of harried consumerism reality becomes invisible and repression latent.

The media are the main vehicle of this “society of the spectacle”, controlling the individuals’ desires by means of stereotypes, images and ideology. Yet the content of the media is less decisive than the fundamental structures of media itself. Structure in fact determines content. The form of media inscribes itself into its messages. Media shape society.

“The medium is the message”, as we know since McLuhan. The system message of media, their “operating system” itself, conditions community, dictating norms, rules and codes of behaviour that barely anyone can free themselves from. And it is not alone techno-media that form reality. Already with the beginning of language, the first human-made images and the emergence of writing human reality constructs itself according to the requirements of these sign systems. Writing was the precondition for larger systems of dominance, shaping trade in process of expanding and the states in process of formation. Much later, book printing altered society and its members, shifting class distinctions and pushing economic development. Oblak and Novak play with this structural context. In *Reality is Out*, it is not the protagonists who escape the media frame, but rather the sign “reality”, which breaks into reality while at the same time putting in question our notion of reality.

Here they follow Slavoj Žižek, who has again and again emphasized with verve that wit, jest and the openness of playful action can open up little windows to “truth” for subjects in a constructed reality. Otherwise, the individual, so Žižek closely following Lacan, is entirely controlled by desire and from the triad of the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary. Human wants are controlled by consumerism as the engine of modern capitalism, while the media are both guardians and the tarted up world in which we live. Global pop culture and American dominated cinema in particular are like the photo wallpaper of this holding cell, concealing its true character. The signs obtain autonomy; the world of signs becomes the simulacrum (Baudrillard) of a world caught in self-reference. Reality remains illusion, since people are unable to tell apart the Real from the Symbolic. At the instant the “Reality” sign moves out of the box it designates the reality of the viewer as such. The artists’ hope of obtaining an instrument of knowledge rests on this humoristic tautology. Like Žižek, Oblak and Novak also seek artistic strategies to undermine the constant seduction, without resorting to moralistic, ideological argument.

The combination of robot mechanics with message-bearing signs already belonged to their praxis prior to *Reality is Out*. The mobile robots from *Activists* (2011) carry signs with protest phrases reminiscent of occupy and outrage movements, though chiefly appropriating the protest culture of the Situationist International from the 1960s, in which Guy Debord was a central figure. The machines make demands like “Defend The Right To Protest”, “Give Me Back My Future” and “Time’s Up”, moving freely within the exhibition spaces of the art world. Consequent on their social analysis, the artists view the machines as bearers of free social expression and as the legitimate occupiers of public space, while humans petrify in sedentary consumerism. The apparatuses lay claim to the subjective freedom of volition that German romantic philosophers ascribed exclusively to humans. In this sense, reality has “really” jumped out of the box, Pandora’s box, which serves not to conceal the uncanny but to cultivate our illusions. Outside is the rule of the uncomprehended, disorder, horror. *Reality Is Out* – but we prefer to remain inside.

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