



"The Future of an Event (in Art and Technology)"

A Slought Foundation Lecture and Public Conversation:
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Full information online: <http://slought.org/toc/calendar/display.php?id=1137>

Krzysztof Ziarek: "The Force of Art"

This project attempts to come to an understanding of what constitutes the force of art, that is, the capacity of artworks to critique and transform power relations which they inherit from society in which they come into being. My starting point is the idea, or the sense, that, at the turn of the new millennium, almost a hundred years after the Modernist explosion and the great promise of the avant-garde, art appears to become less and less significant in social terms, that it has lost whatever meager vestiges of force and importance it still might have held earlier in the 20th century within the increasingly technological and commodified culture of the present day.

In response to this impasse concerning art's social function, my approach aims to recover and redefine art's transformative force. I associate this force with the idea of art as an event, an event which brings into question the continuously growing technicization of relations. By technicization here, working with Heidegger's rethinking of the essence of technology, I mean the facility with which all types of things, experiences, and relations are characterized today by their intrinsic availability as information. Against this backdrop, I see art as an event in which at stake is precisely this contemporary "informatting" of reality and the possibility of a transformative turn in it. As Bill Viola suggests, contemporary art finds itself in a transitional stage, no longer capable or willing to play the old aesthetic and cultural roles assigned to it and yet uncertain, even confused, about its place in the techno-world of the 21st century. The disorientation to which Viola points indeed signals the central dilemma facing art today: is art part and parcel of the continuing technological acceleration of modern culture, an aesthetic branch of techno-power, as it were, or does it mark the possibility of a critical turn, even transformation, in the play of power?

My suggestion is that indeed the work of art in the 21st century should be thought in terms of the possibility of such a transformation or turn within the technological. Since this transformative effect of art would occur on the level of force relations, I proposed elsewhere the term *forcework* to describe both what makes artworks distinctive from other objects and what allows art to intervene into social practice. The forcework can be defined in a preliminary fashion as a re-disposition of forces into a constellation alternative to the socio-historical conditions of art production. In this view, the work of art is a multi-dimensional space-time event, where force relations come to be transformed through the "force" of *poiēsis*. *Poiēsis* is what makes art possible: it is a kind of force or bearing, specific to art. This poetic force remains, as Adorno and Heidegger each in his own way explain, an enigma, ungraspable and illegible within the discourses, whether aesthetic, scientific, or cultural, which this artistic force itself transforms in the process of inscribing them in the artwork. When social forces enter the "space" of art, they come under the bearing of *poiēsis* which reconfigures and re-disposes them. As such a forcefield, an artwork becomes an interface between the social world and the artistic dimension of the work, staging repeatedly the very transformative event, the synapse between art and "reality," which allows art to remain autonomous precisely for the sake of critiquing and revising the real. I will close by pointing to the implications of this rethinking of the event for the idea of the work of art.

First of all, an artwork can no longer be conceived as an object, but, instead, should be understood as an event, that is, as a dynamic re-disposition of relations inscribed in it through the socio-cultural determination of artistic production. The emphasis placed here on the "event" of art does not cancel the inevitable, and indeed necessary, materiality of artworks but points to the double character of artwork, understood both as an "act" and a shaped product. It is the "fact" of the physicality of artworks, their necessary existence as objects or media with their apparent constancy, which highlights the "inconstant," volatile, and transformative event at the core of the artwork. Secondly, the idea that the work of art is an active interchange with history and society, provides a counter argument to the notion that works of art are primarily either aesthetic objects or commodities.

This event is sponsored by the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania

EXHIBITION SPACE, OFFICES

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