

# process as paradigm

## art in development, flux and change

### Curators' Notes

With this exhibition and accompanying programme we curators formulate a bold thesis. We claim that process – and here we mean non-linear and non-deterministic process – has become one of the major paradigms in contemporary art and culture.

More than this, we see a strong connection of this cultural development to the current situation of the globalised world which is shaken by on-going military and religious conflicts, the sudden meltdown of world economy and the threat of climate change, only to name the big headlines. In the light of the current and reoccurring crises it has become obvious that these processes of greater scale and impact are not necessarily following simple rules of predictability or linearity. What might have been a wrong construct in general and the consequence of a deceptive linear narrative of history – a world which is at least partially manageable by us humans – has turned into a scattered, “atemporal” picture. In this period of “atemporality” we experience “the loss of a canon and a record,” says Bruce Sterling.<sup>2</sup> There is no single empowered authoritative voice of history. [...] This really changes the narrative and the orderly representation of history in a way that history cannot recover from.[...] The situation now is one of growing disorder, of failed states, of a potentially failed globe.”<sup>1</sup>

Apparently the social, cultural, ecologic and economic processes of our time are of such great complexity that it is difficult to fully comprehend their construction and built-in dynamical factors and hence to master them. When now looking at the world and trying to figure underlying principles for the various interrelated or parallel developments, the idea of the multi-agent, non-teleological, continuous and complex process prevails over simpler cause-and-effect models. “The irruption of radical uncertainty in all fields and the end of the comforting universe of determinacy is not at all a negative fate, so long as uncertainty itself becomes the new rule of the game. So long as we do not seek to correct that uncertainty, by injecting new values, new certainties, but have it circulate as the basic rule.” writes

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Sterling in his keynote at transmediale festival 2010.

Jean Baudrillard in „Impossible Exchange“.<sup>2</sup> If we follow Baudrillard in his argument that systems lack orderly bipolarity, causality and balance, we are challenged to make the best out of the absence of polarity and its consequences: the systems' exponential drift and hypothetical disorder.

In this understanding, the difference between subject and object is not existent and so is the distance between us humans and the world. Being part of the world we cannot distance ourselves from it and “think the world”, because the world “thinks us” at the same time.

However, the danger of accepting the idea that we are caught up in a system that might be discontinuous and undetermined lies in dwelling on fatalism and rejecting responsibility for any process we are involved in.

Despite all the uncertainty and lack of control that have resurfaced lately, but have accompanied mankind ever since and which are major drives of religious belief and politics of fear, most of our daily actions, as well as the conduct of economy and politics, are based on an understanding of likelihood, repetition and causal logic. The Enlightenment seeded the conviction of the existence of principles in nature that organise the development of the world. As a consequence, centuries of scientific research accumulated knowledge and nurtured the confidence in the certainty and predictability of many processes with which we are engaged on a daily basis, be it the automated direction of urban traffic or the navigation of the auto pilot that flies us across the Atlantic.

This is the dichotomy that the exhibition explores: the wide field between predictability and uncertainty, the instability and relative balance of systems and the processes which unfold in them. We look at systems constructed by artists and then released into the world; processes taking over their own development; experimental situations implemented in the relative stable environment of an exhibition.

The subtitle of the show speaks of “art in development, flux and change” and thus addresses the prominent properties of the works presented. “In development” refers to the process of creation that the artist is involved in. In contemporary art, the creation itself has often become a process that does not come to a standstill, but

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, Verso, London-New York, 2001, p.8.

continues even after the formulation or construction of one manifestation. Very often works of art are versions or modified iterations of one concept that is developed further and which does not eventuate in one manifestation only, but is expressed in a series of works which differ only marginally, or even in one work that is improved or changed with every presentation.

This art does no longer hold on to the safe properties of the final object, the ultimate manifestation of a creative process. In its production, it responds to the major shift from an industrial culture based on the concept of the final product to a post-industrial, networked culture. It explores the variety of form and behaviour of systems and objects without limiting itself to the rules of an art market that favours the single specimen. Being more work-in-progress than finalised matter, this art bears the possibility of the infinite series, of the unfinished and open-ended oeuvre.

The network society with its new and successful models of collaborative production has very much paved the way for the idea of rhizomic structures and low hierarchy systems in other disciplines. The participatory concept of multiple authors is one that is also explored in art in various forms and degrees of radicalism. "In development" could also be read as a reference to those kinds of open systems, in which the artists hand over power and autonomy to others. However those processual systems work best if the rules are clearly defined and respected by the participants.

As much as "process" and "development" seem to be a tautology at first glance, so are "process" and "flux." Processes are in flux as long as they don't end, they simply continue and move on, unless they 'run dry', run out of energy or are disrupted. But "flux" too bears the connotation of the *Fluxus* art movement that celebrated performativity and temporality with an anti-art-market attitude in the 60's of last century. Discernibly, the name *Fluxus* originated in the terms "flux" and "flow" which basically describe an active movement and the performance of a fluid substance.

Within the concept of process which we have intended to explore in the exhibition, "in flux" first and foremost alludes to the strong aspect of performativity and temporality which all works on display manifest. Performative in nature, the artworks progress with different speeds and durations, thus rejecting standard habits

of perceiving art. Instead the works demand for persistent, durative or repeated observation, although the changes within them will not be spectacular. What unites these processes is their ambient character and subtle dramaturgy that both reject the often theatrical gesture of the art object and the suspense principle of narrative. The processes' ambient flow and continuous generativity shapes a new paradigm of art, which the curators are certain will become well accepted in the future for it fosters the idea of an art that merges with everyday life, accompanying it and successively changing through it.

Finally, it is "change" that processes undergo. While "development" refers more to the process of production and "flux" adverts to the processes' performativity, "change" describes the different stages of existence and behaviour of processes and the points at which they shift. These moments of shift, be they triggered by the inner construction or programming of a system or by exterior events and agents, often evoke the impression of a living system.

In the last years, the live generation of form has entered art practice and produced physical and immaterial objects which seem to have a life of their own. These processes might underlie principles of self-organisation or sometimes types of artificial intelligence which can create a surprising palette of behaviours and forms "draining human intentionality", like Bruce Sterling puts it.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, computer-based media art to a large degree is processual by nature and therefore stands also in the centre of the exhibition, but processuality is far from being exclusive to media art. On the contrary, the concept of process, as described earlier on, appears as a paradigm in various neighbouring disciplines like design and architecture, but also in other contemporary art practices. The conceptual vicinity of digital works of art based on the interaction of multiple systemic elements, and of works based on the social or cultural dynamics within a space and its users – as in works that might fall into the broad category of Relational Art<sup>4</sup> – may not be entirely obvious.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Sterling, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud introduces the concept of relational aesthetics as a "set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." He emphasizes the processual human-to-human nature and refers to artworks that explicitly create social events. In: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Engl. translation), Les presses de réel, Dijon-Quetigny, 2002, pp.112-113.

What unites them though are a number of aspects. In both practices artists create processes whose outcomes are open. The processes unfold in dependence of the environment they are injected into, or of the various elements they are comprised of. The social and experimental nature of Relational Art and other forms of more interventionist social and participatory art practices challenges the traditional art system and its institutions as much as digital or biological process-based works. The transient quality of the latter calls for systems that are not based on permanence and maintenance, but that adjust to the arts' fugaciousness and experimentalism, also in economic terms. Besides, the idea of process has repercussions on traditional artistic media like sculpture, installation, photography and the moving image, in that their production is turned into either a collaborative process or a feedback loop, or follows principles of decay, randomness, and performativity.

The exhibition also presents artworks that explore living matter as medium. The introduction of biology in artistic production marks only one more step of contemporary art into natural science. Artists nowadays do not accept any boundaries which would keep them from dealing with all relevant aspects of existence. The field of artistic work has massively broadened due to easier access to expert knowledge, and to digital means of communication in the networked world. Artists have always been researchers on various levels, be it in the way they experimented with colours and their chemical composition or how they explored methods of representation of time, space, objects and the invisible. The Renaissance and the Baroque in particular saw a close relationship between the arts and sciences. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the formerly mutual interest and exchange between these disciplines massively changed. They both developed into separate and autonomous practices as we know them now. The sciences turned into highly technological, institutionalised and professionalised academic practices, and led to the conviction that scientific theory and experimental research should not be influenced by or take into consideration social, political, religious or ethical affairs.<sup>5</sup>

Art is now engaging again the field of science, but with different purposes, either to simply find new processual media to expand the spectrum of artistic expression or to investigate the very ethical, political and social conditions under which living matter is scientifically and economically exploited.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Zwijnenberg: *Preface*, in: *Art in the Age of Technoscience. Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art*, ed. Ingeborg Reichle, Springer Wien/New York, 2009.

In difference to scientific experiments, artworks based on the exploration of living media are mostly presented to the public in the context of art institutions that places these works at the meta-level of artistic and cultural discourses. While scientific research follows the rule of irrefutable proof for its validation, the objectives of an experimental artwork are different. In addition to the cultural and philosophical dimension that the artwork should convey, the experiment must prove its technological and conceptual thesis right. That is to say, the processual artwork must also “function” and develop within the spectrum of possibilities foreseen by the artist. In this sense, failure also exists in the interpretational and relatively open framework of art, but it is a different kind of failure than in science, which strictly follows objective criteria of validation.

The exhibition displays key examples of processual art. However, mainly because of practicalities it could not show works exceeding the format of a gallery exhibition and step outside this safe ground into the open social space of the city. Certainly, the curatorial selection could be easily expanded to more artistic practices and formats, and we hope that we will have the opportunity to do this in a subsequent edition of the show. In a workshop that will take place shortly before the opening of the LABoral exhibition, artists will further explore the conceptual range of process-based art. Its outcome will be accessible in the form of prototypes and in the documentation in the exhibition. Furthermore, *Process as Paradigm* will be accompanied by a lively academic and lay discourse, by teaching activities and blogging. In this sense, the exhibition at LABoral is not a final product, but an on-going process to which we curators would like to call for as many contributions and as much participation as possible.

In art there is no way back, but more than ever there are parallel movements, practices and concepts – of which the paradigmatic turn to process is one of many, one that unquestionably has the potential to have a long-lasting effect on the conception of art. Depending on how momentous the paradigmatic shift to process is, we might already have entered a new era in art.

Susanne Jaschko and Lucas Evers

