

Back to 0, or: What appears before us

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Starting from 0

The image is roughly divided into four quarters, two of which are left blank. In the upper lefthand corner we see the drawn portrait of a bearded man who is looking at us. As the drawing is presented upside down, we cannot tell for sure if he is smiling at us. His head is slightly leaning to our left - and to his right - but this might be due to the irregular shape of his head. He is wearing a shirt. There is no context given, just the head and part of the shoulders. At the same time, the drawing does not stand on its own. Its movement of being turned upside down is repeated in the photograph in the bottom righthand corner where we see a man wearing trainers, socks, short trousers and a T-Shirt turned upside down with his head hidden in the hole of a sculpture. It is not clear whether his hands on the stone are keeping him in balance or whether he is using the wall for support, too. Nor do we know for how long he has already been in that position. In front of the sculpture there is a framed drawing showing another sculpture that looks like a curved platform. By performing on top of it, the man connects both the drawing and the large sculpture that contains other holes. A woman is standing in the background, but she does not look at the performer. As the photograph is taken in black and white, her clothes appear dark and create a visual connection with the trousers and legs of the performer. The photograph appears dense on a visual level as it combines very different elements, the performer, the sculpture, the drawing and the woman presumed to be a member of the public. Its visual style does not correspond with the roughness of the strokes in the man's portrait, and yet: to show only his head while the head of the performer is hidden at the same time, creates a strange communication between the two parts of the image. I would like to see this combination as a portrait of the diversity of works and styles in Alexandra's artistic world. Coming from sculpture, she always explored drawing and especially portraits as a parallel way of expressing emotions and bonds, whereas her sculptures drew from everyday life and gradually became more abstract but never lost touch with the reality of the city and its social life.

Materiality

The sculpture we see in the photograph as well as the drawing are part of a series called *Imaginary Platforms* that started with Alexandra's fascination for the way skaters use public space and which moved towards more general questions on the use of public space in general and the relationship between materials and thoughts. When she invited the performer Márcio Pereira to use some of her sculptures during the opening of her exhibition in Evora in August 2018 he explored what skaters do with their board in a bodily performance: the smoothness and resistance, the curves and lines of flight, in short: the materiality of the objects skaters are interacting with. Far from being abstract elements, surrounding objects are put to use when skating, and the same happened to the series of sculptures that Alexandra presented in public space in Evora and that were immediately occupied by passers-by and even once carried to a different location as a clandestine act. Her sculptures are situated at the crossroad between the use of public space and its real and symbolic occupation by forces that transform the social into (financial) signs. The city is not only a place of presumed freedom to skate, but also the centre of a digital mutation, where technical automatism takes control of the social psyche, to draw from Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's book *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009). How much freedom, how much flow can those sculptures offer to our imagination?

From my perspective they are much more than platforms, they inspire our thoughts about how to appropriate the city space, be it in a similar or a different way to the actual skaters. To skate blurs the borders between public and private space because it makes in-between sites productive for movement. The sculptures produce a similar flow by offering a smooth surface for an imaginary move. But this movement does not happen in an empty space, and by placing her sculptures in public space as well as in an open room where part of the exhibition and the performance took place, Alexandra points to the density of relations that are already in place and at the same time makes them visible.

In every movement through the city space we produce what Henri Lefebvre called 'social space'. Skaters as members of subcultures of the city create their own social space by using certain codes and ways of moving. What happens if we become imaginary skaters? What connects us in the moment of our movements of thought, what divides us and makes us singular? And, following Gilles Deleuzes' and Felix Guattari's thoughts: How

much resistance do those platforms produce in a smooth, commercialized city space? How do we want to make use of them here and now?

Immateriality

While the first part of *Imaginary Platforms* involved large scale sculptures in public space, among other works, the second part named *Atrito (Friction)* happened in an exhibition space in Lisbon called *Anexo*, where Alexandra's project took place in a room and in the garden in the backyard. If her first intervention in Evora explored the materiality of city space and her sculptures as (counter)part of it, the second exhibition in Lisbon moved towards the immaterial, although objects were present in it. When she asked me to write on her new work, she mentioned a couple of authors who had had an impact on it, among them the Italian philosophers Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Matteo Pasquinelli. What I consider special in their writing is that they do not shy away from using old Christian terms and images to describe something completely new: the neurosemiotic impact of the virtual on our body and psyche. The part of the text that follows now is a slight rewriting of some passages of an essay that I wrote on the occasion of Alexandra's exhibition, it focuses in particular on the second part of *Imaginary Platforms*, which is why I have chosen to include it here.

Act One

The soul does not lie beneath the skin. It is the angle of this swerve and what then holds these bodies together. It spaces bodies, rather than hiding within them; it is among them, their consistency, the affinity they have for one another. It is what they share in common: neither a form, nor some thing, but a rhythm, a certain way of vibrating, a resonance. Frequency, tuning or tone.

Jason Smith, in: Franco 'Bifo' Berardi: *The Soul at Work*

Rhythm is materialized immaterially. It synchronizes our heartbeat, the sensation on our skin or the resonance in our ear with the outside world. It makes our body vibrate; sound waves reach us just like waves in the sea. Even a rhythm we create ourselves materializes before entering the outside world as speech or sound. Rhythm is the living proof that we exist on the edge between the material and the immaterial without having to decide which side to take. Both exist at the same time and are interwoven. The soul in Smith's reading could be a membrane between bodies vibrating when they are moving closer. The best proof that a soul is not contained in one body only but oscillating between bodies is the event of falling in love. Falling in love produces an imagination strong enough to alter the physical composition of our body. The nervous system gets activated, hormones are released, the body is under a constant attack of impulses coming not only from the outside, but at the same time from the inside to the extent that it becomes irrelevant if the stimulus derives from the real or imagined body of the other person. It is all a question of tuning, only in this particular state the sound is too loud for us to act in a 'normal' way. If our bodies are the material side, our neuronal network provides the platform to act out the imaginary.

Act Two

Today the immaterial parasite has become molecular and endemic — everybody is carrying an intellectual and cybernetic parasite.

Matteo Pasquinelli: *The Ideology of Free Culture and the Grammar of Sabotage*

Parasites are invisible when they are hiding in your body. They are a foreign element drawing resources from you. You might not notice their presence. Without knowing, you are forced to share what you take for granted. I am particularly intrigued by the idea of having a parasite from the virtual world entering our bodies. We always perceive the screens of our laptops and phones as something detached, devices that are touched only by our fingertips. But what if the contagion zone includes the space between us and our devices? What kind of parasites cross the threshold between the virtual world and our

body? Let's talk about online platforms. What is being produced and what is being taken from us at the same time? Platforms promise constant contact, sometimes with strangers. But more than that they promise an endless choice. There is always somebody else available. If communication fails in one case, another contact is ready to take off. But platforms and the communication flowing through them need attention - constantly. They suck your energy, your appetite, your sleep, they keep you alert, day and night. Their virtual substance is stronger than the drugs you might otherwise consume, because it is pure promise. You could never have this many contacts at the same time in so-called real life. The price you pay is the immaterial parasite reconfiguring your metabolism in the act of stimulation and imagination of a constant interaction. There is no difference between activity and passivity anymore as one feeds into the other. You have become the base of the platform you are sustaining with your own desire.

Act Three

Putting the soul to work: this is the new form of alienation. Out desiring energy is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital.

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi: *The Soul at Work*

Think of work and desire as one entity. Our emotional investments, our dreams, our projections are being put to work - especially when working in the field of visual arts. You need something to keep you going, and if there is no immediate response, then you anticipate it in your effort of getting the work out there - or images of your work, of you working, of your work-in-progress or at least posts about images of your work. We rarely work with materials these days, or, if we do so, we translate the work with materials into communication. Running a self-enterprise can be understood as forming our selves in order to fit into the enterprise others should respond to. This constant communication process leaves imprints on what Bifo calls the soul. In the case of Oscar Wilde's famous

character Dorian Gray, these imprints appear in Gray's portrait while he himself stays young and immaculate. Looking at this imaginary portrait brings up all sorts of questions: What about aging? What about getting sick or becoming exhausted? What about the wish to withdraw, just for a while? It is not our selves as a whole that are welcome to the enterprise of art (and other activities). If the material and virtual world both push us to be as immaculate as Dorian Gray, where do we hide our self-portrait in times when even our soul is put to work?

Intermission

As I am writing these lines, I can feel my tendons itching from the amount of words I have typed today. The street noise creates an acoustic rhythm that does not correspond with the flickering animation of the pharmacy sign on the other side of the street. There are already programs that substitute the written word, where spoken commands make your computer search terms for you. What started as a tool has become an environment. Its reality unites more workers than ever, though all of them specialized, or at least trying to be. Objects become rare. Things done by hand become either precious or are neglected. I am not sure if my contribution goes with or against the flow. When grounds keep shifting, directions are difficult to recognize. But if there is no way back to the safe ground of materiality, then let's embody the immaterial instead.

Back to 0

... two lines intersect, separate and pass through infinity and beyond, only to suddenly reappear at the same point of intersection. As we look in a concave mirror, the image vanishes into infinity and appears again close before us.

Heinrich von Kleist: *On the Marionette Theatre*

Perspective changes on our journey through the infinite or simply along lines of thought, but there is no synthesis. A synthesis would mean to close a chapter while pages are still open. In this text I have opened several pages, inspired by Alexandra's work, our conversations and the texts we both read and are fond of. I feel like I left the material, moved through the immaterial and am now back again looking at the image she offered as a starting point for this text. I haven't paid much attention to the woman who appeared to be a member of the public and who did not look at the performer at the time the image was taken. What is she looking at? The other works that were part of the show? A partner in conversation? Another photographer who caught her attention? Leaning against the wall, she does not seem to want to interact with what is going on around her. But maybe that is not true. Maybe she is deep in thought and if we could read her mind we would find the lines of thought that crossed this text and maybe - if we are lucky - even a way out...

Berlin, November 2019

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