‘No Culture No Future’: Virtuality and Its Discontents Reinvented

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When Lithuania, along with much of the rest of the world, went into a nationwide lockdown amid the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the late 2020, the situation for the country’s culture and arts sector seemed to be worse than during the first quarantine. Although there was already substantial know-how necessary for mitigating the negative effects of the closure of physical spaces and live events by transferring cultural content online, there was a growing sentiment that it was not enough. With institutional plans halted and most events streamed on the Internet, it gradually became clear that the ‘digital culture’ niche which had been in the making for several decades was perceived by the cultural mainstream largely as a supplementary layer for the conventional offline, face-to-face, ‘real’ cultural life, rather than as equivalent to the latter.

While artists, institutions, and cultural producers were exploring mediated formats of reaching the audience and (re)discovering the potential of digital media, symptoms of a ‘digital fatigue’ were becoming increasingly evident. Several months into the quarantine, the Lithuanian culture community adopted the slogan ‘No Culture No Future’ and called for opening up the cultural sector for live, unmediated activity despite of the difficult epidemiological situation. The professed reasons for this were not so much economical but instead quasi-spiritual, based on the idea that it was precisely culture and art that ensured the society’s mental well-being (and thus resilience against major crisis like a viral outbreak), to the point of being prescribed as a kind of ‘medication’ in some countries.

This situation prompts some important questions. What are the implications for the longstanding fascination with the ideas of telepresence and online creative practice in at least some milieus like media art or net art? Has the sudden compulsory virtualisation of all cultural activity rendered these earlier fantasies completely irrelevant and even inappropriate? Or is it a case of cultural ignorance/amnesia that points to the still obscure status of the practices and discourses of art and technology, new media art, network art and digital art within the larger context of contemporary culture? Looking at some conflicting notions of virtuality in the different art worlds and periods, the article seeks to critically reflect on the related value systems and provide some thoughts on whether the international digital culture movement of the 1990s–2010s has any legacy that is widely recognised as legitimate and influential.

1. INTRODUCTION

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 and the ensuing repeated lockdowns in 2020-2021 left few spheres of human activity unaffected worldwide. Due to their substantial dependence on live experience and immediate interaction, art and culture are among the spheres to have been hit particularly heavily, with most cultural institutions and venues shut down for the entire quarantine periods. This unforeseen situation and the need to sustain at least some part of the usual activities prompted the majority of art and culture institutions as well as individual artists to turn to various forms of remote online communication with their audiences and dissemination of creative content in digital form, which they may not have employed before.

Over time the reaction of both the cultural producers and the audiences to such forced confinement to ‘innovative media’ ranged from initial enthusiasm and eagerness to learn new skills or explore new forms of outreach to eventual ‘digital fatigue’, feeling overwhelmed with the surge in available online content, lacking face-to-face interaction with other members of the cultural
community, and lamenting the precarious and disadvantaged status of cultural workers during involuntary and indefinite downtime. The plea for a lifting of the restrictions for the arts and culture sector found its expression in the slogan ‘No Culture No Future’, with which cultural workers and institutions in Lithuania in particular as well as some other countries adorned their social media profile pages or, as in the emblematic case of the French actress Corinne Masiero at the 2021 Les Césars film awards, their own body. The evident message behind this motto is that accessible cultural experiences and services are crucial to human well-being and the survival of society at large in the long run. Moreover, the rhetoric that surrounds it also signals that art and culture have not only aesthetic, intellectual or economic but also spiritual or therapeutic value that can mitigate the deteriorating effect of the pandemic on the public emotional and mental health.

While the artists’ collective outcry about their (as well as the public’s) worsening financial and psychological condition caused by the inaccessibility of cultural activities is understandable, some of the elements of the aforementioned rhetoric seem genuinely puzzling. Particularly so to anyone who is at least tangentially acquainted with the fairly long history of experiments in digital art and culture of the 1990s and 2000s (and to some extent into the 2010s) that sought, among other things, to radically democratise and decentralise the production and consumption of culture, using emerging technological tools to promote inclusion, collaboration and open circulation of creative content. What such emancipatory initiatives (mostly falling into the categories of net art or new media art) aimed to achieve was precisely a new kind of culture that could break away from the rigid and exclusive system of art institutions and the art market itself, providing greater involvement without limitations imposed by geography or level of artistic proficiency and cultural erudition. The recurring motif of the pandemic-era grievances, however, is that only ‘live’ culture can achieve the desired therapeutic effect, while culture confined to telepresence and online mediation or documentation is essentially neutralised or even detrimental.

Yet even if one focuses on the optimistic responses to the opportunities offered by the pandemic situation, there is a surprising common element to them: the pervasive emphasis on the supposed radical novelty of art and culture going online. Particularly in the case of art scenes and communities that previously relied on digital communication technology in the spheres of advertising, public relations and documentation rather than actual creative practice, the need to transfer virtually all their activities to the internet for the period of the lockdown seems to have opened a new, hitherto unfamiliar space of creation and dissemination of art. This points to a vast awareness gap between the more traditional art forms dependent on the live presence of the audience and the pioneering art movements of the recent decades that sought to promote art and culture enabled by and engaging with emerging telematic technology, namely the Internet and related tools such as webcasting and videoconferencing.

There is already some research on certain aspects of the use of technology during lockdown in the arts and culture sector such as the impact of the pandemic on the activities of cultural institutions and individual artists, changes in the level of arts engagement during the pandemic, forms of virtual exhibitions and other forms of online artistic content, or the phenomenon of ‘digital fatigue’ or ‘Zoom fatigue’. What seems to be lacking is a consideration of the (ir)relevance of earlier experience and know-how of the net art and new media art communities to the current situation, as well as the implications of the lockdown-induced massive disaffection with digital technology and remote communication (to put it somewhat simplistically, virtuality in general) for the development and reception of technology-based or technology-related art. Thus, this paper attempts to overview how the digital culture precursors of the last three decades seem to be omitted from the present-day popular discourse on art in virtual space – with a particular focus on the case of Lithuania in an international context. Rather than formulating a definition of networked art or art on the net, which has been done many times in various texts by artists and theorists such as Josephine Bosma, Andreas Beckmann, David Ross, Rachel Greene, and Geert Lovink, or providing a typology of virtual and hybrid environments in which art and culture can reside, the aim is to expose and emphasize the current discursive inconsistencies and blind spots that reflect the more general underacknowledgement of digital and telematic arts as a field with its own rich history.

2. A BRIEF PREHISTORY OF ART ON (AND AFTER) THE INTERNET

Contrary to what many art producers and consumers as well as administrators seem to believe in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, art had ventured into virtual space long before this landmark event – more importantly, it was not just physical art objects that were exhibited online as images, but art that was made specifically for and on the internet. Since the arrival of the World Wide Web in 1994 and the documented birth of net art in 1996, a specific international group of closely
associated artists interested in the merging of art, technology and science, who came to form the new media art scene in the late 1990s and 2000s, sought to develop an online art world of their own outside of the conventional institutional art system (Paul 2010). Their chief aim was not to use technology for its own sake, but rather to deploy it for critical and experimental purposes (Tribe et al., 2006, 6). The history and development of this specific ‘network culture’ is extensively covered in major publications written and edited by prominent new media art researchers and theorists, including Mark Tribe (2006), Christiane Paul (2016) and Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (2015).

Some other theorists like Domenico Quaranta or Geert Lovink, however, have been more sceptical about the long-term success and relevance of new media art within the broader art system, claiming that the former is not really an art movement or a niche of contemporary art, but rather an art world unto itself that is ignored by the contemporary art milieu and in turn refuses to be a part of it (Quaranta, 2013), or even a ‘self-referential ghetto dominated by techno-fetishism’ (Lovink, 2007). The controversial article ‘Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media’ by the renowned art critic Claire Bishop, in which she criticises the paradoxical lack of engagement with themes related to the digital revolution on the part of contemporary artists while simultaneously dismissing the entire new media art scene as ‘a specialized field of its own’ that ‘rarely overlaps with the mainstream art world’ (Bishop 2012), also suggests a lack of mutual awareness and communication between the worlds of NMA (New Media Art) and MCA (Mainstream Contemporary Art).  

The historical marginalisation of new media art in relation to the mainstream art system may also provide an explanation as to why its legacy of relocating art production, dissemination and reception to the Internet and other telematic platforms has remained for the most part unacknowledged when the volume of online creative content surged during the lockdown. A possible reason for that is the fact that while the technology-related practice and discourse of net art and new media art were limited to a relatively small and insular community of artist-practitioners, activists and researchers, in the new pandemic circumstances these means were rediscovered – out of necessity rather than conscious intention – by a significantly larger number of people with no knowledge of previous developments and achievements in this sphere, cultural workers and audiences alike.

In comparison to new media art, the loosely connected postinternet art movement of the late 2000s and 2010s proved to be much more in line with the demands of the mainstream art market.  

The postinternet paradigm as formulated by artists and theorists like Marisa Olson, Artie Vierkant, Gene McHugh and Hito Steyerl maintained that art directly influenced by the Internet experience (that is, almost literally produced after surfing the web) did not have to be confined to any kind of ‘virtual reality’ or ‘online domain’, because with the arrival of the Web 2.0 technology, unprecedented accessibility of the Internet network and ceaseless circulation of images and other data between the virtual and physical spaces there was no longer any distinction between ‘online’ and ‘offline’, as the Internet itself had ‘stopped being a possibility’, moved offline and was literally everywhere (Steyerl, 2013).

Although artists associated with the post-internet circle seemed to engage with almost the same technologies as new media artists did, most of them owed little to this preceding technology-focused art paradigm, which they ‘denounced as a mode too narrowly focused on the specific workings of novel technologies, rather than a sincere exploration of cultural shifts in which that technology plays only a small role’ (Vierkant, 2010). According to the curator and writer Michael Connor, in the postinternet condition ‘the focus of a good deal of artistic and critical discourse has shifted from ‘internet culture’ as a discrete entity to the reconfiguration of all culture by the internet, or by internet-enabled neoliberal capitalism’ (Connor, 2013). In the simplest terms, postinternet ultimately amounted to taking internet-derived art out of the web browser and placing it in the form of monetarily and aesthetically liquid objects or images into the physical space (usually the traditional white cube of the gallery), from where they would often make it back to the browser in the form of installation shots (Droitcour, 2014), thus anticipating the pandemic-era proliferation of online documentation of material exhibitions that visitors could not access physically.

In other words, postinternet art offered gallery-friendly Internet-aware cultural content that did not treat the network itself as exclusive or even indispensable.

Curiously, the postinternet perspective also seems to be problematic in the pandemic situation because its validity depends on the simultaneous coexistence and accessibility of both the offline and online layers of experience (no matter how supposedly blurred the borders between the two). When, as in the case of a lockdown, the physical domain is practically limited to the private space of one’s home, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the internet as having moved offline and pervaded every sphere of activity and experience in Steyerl’s sense. Rather, all social activities including cultural ones that used to involve live physical interaction (undoubtedly augmented by connectivity features such as instantly uploading
location-based photographs and other content to the Internet) in galleries, theatres, concert halls and other institutions are compressed into purely online protocols of videoconferencing and messaging that do not differ fundamentally from the modes of remote interaction characteristic of earlier net art and new media art – yet without the latter’s trademark utopianism.

The history of the intersections of art and the Internet in Lithuania follows more or less the same logic, albeit on a smaller scale. An early example of art utilising the network as its native and preferred medium is Institutio Media, a quasi-academic virtual institution dedicated to the practice and promotion of net art and media art through netcasting and information archives. It was established in 1998 by the artists Mindaugas Gapševičius, Kęstutis Andrašiūnas and Darius Mikšys, and run primarily by Gapševičius (mi_ga) after 2000, when it became an institutional framework for his various personal and collaborative projects rather than a functional online entity. The institution’s description written by Andrašiūnas reads:

We also wish to explore the relation of physically limited and virtual spaces. In a real space and time the functioning of an institution is restricted by its premises and the regularity of activity, which is necessary for the interactivity and existence of that institution. In a virtual space it is restricted by technology and the quality of connection. The Web makes it possible to avoid the expropriation of the physical location – it is replaced by a ‘site’ in a server – the quantity of magnetic memory.

The institution’s Tautological Manifesto of the Media written in 1998 and rewritten in 2001 features a somewhat more poetic passage:

By the action of a machine, the resistance of time and space has been changed. A physical action is transformed into a sequence of signals and remotely transmitted. In this way we can experience a new concept of time and space not only theoretically, but also practically. The change in comprehension of space and time inescapably brings about a change in the means of communication and creating art. A machine becomes a mediator between a spectator and environment. This makes way for quick indirect communication and creation of dynamic communities. Communities whose members are not bound up with a physical location. We call the location in which the life of this community is taking place, virtual. Virtual location is created by means of interaction between the spectators-participants and an electronic machine. […] In this environment art acquires a new form and means of spreading. Art not only uses a machine but also changes together with the machine. […] Art always oscillates between the real and virtual world, affects reality and is affected by it. It is discovered and broadcast, mobile and multiplying.

Here one may easily discern a fundamental difference between the techno-optimistic rhetoric of the new media era and the present-day popular anti-virtual sentiment: whereas for Institutio Media it was physical space that was limiting, in the pandemic context it is precisely the virtual space and remote communication that are predominantly perceived as restricting and downgrading experience. In reality, however, the actual reach of Institutio Media was smaller than its ambitions, and the discourse and practice of net art it promoted did not take root in the Lithuanian art scene after 2000.

Another prominent case is the artist-facilitator practice of the Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas duo under their guise of Jutempus mobile lab for interdisciplinary media arts. The 1997 Ground Control project for artistic exchange between Lithuania and the UK that they initiated together with the London-based Beaconfield artist-run space comprised both Lithuanian and British artists’ physical research trips to and from Lithuania and the UK, and an attempt at establishing an online connection between the two countries and cultures that reflected the contemporary intensification of international communication between the former East and West, utilising the digital network technology that was available at the moment. Again, the project description emphasises the use of virtual communication for opening up and expanding the space of intercultural dialogue through (new media) art:

Actively transforming throughout, the Ground Control web site [...] links participating organisations and individuals and despatches data to the global internet community. But for most of its participants, Ground Control represents the beginning of an exploration into the unknown territories of the new technologies and new pan-European relationships. As such, the use of ephemeral media in this project has been for the primarily practical purposes of relaying information, rather than of creating polished multi-media artworks.

The Urbonas’ next project, tvvv.plotas (1998-1999) similarly explored the possibility of reaching out to the audiences and fellow artists by establishing a virtual public space for critical debate using different communication media such as television and the Internet:

tvvv.plotas is an interdisciplinary art research project that aims to become a platform for discussion about artists survival strategies in different circumstances and contexts using critical discourse as a starting point. tvvv.plotas is in a search for possibilities to communicate
with the audience by infiltrating the national television in Lithuania and opening a space for creative people. Artists, like all human beings, need a place to create, space to make mistakes, and the opportunity to develop opposition. [...] tvv.plotas is constructed as a living environment consisting of several elements: television broadcast, video conference with chat channel, netcast and discussion/meeting in physical space in Vilnius. The RAM6 (Re-Approaching New Media): Social Interaction & Collective Intelligence workshop organised by Jutempus in Vilnius, Lithuania in 2004 featured among other things a live remote performance Forest Test that involved Lithuanian experimental musicians Juozas Miltišius and Darius Čiuta in a real-time collaborative improvisation over an online connection between the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius and a forest outside of the city, also netcast for a wider audience on the website of the Urbonas’ newly established virtual institution VILMA (Vilnius Interdisciplinary Lab for Media Arts). Another participating artist-practitioner and media activist Daniel Garcia Andujar, facilitator of the Technologies to the People initiative, shared his experience of constructing netcasting stations and community networks from old computers in a workshop. These activities reflected the international event’s declared aim to provoke ‘a productive and critical dialogue and an exchange between different artistic cultures using “new media” as tools in their art practice, but also to encourage the creation of new tools and forms of expression/communication’. However, while RAM6 attracted a fairly varied group of local participants and viewers from the younger generation of artists, the ‘hacktivist’ new media art practice and rhetoric proved unable to compete with the then-dominant postconceptual stream in the contemporary art field.

With the arrival of the postinternet trend in the mid-2010s, some notable examples of working with and through the Internet but also adapting its logic and aesthetic to physical exhibition spaces included international projects by the curators Justė Kostikovaitė and Valentinas Klimašauskas. The former launched the online video platform The Deep Splash in 2014 (renamed the good neighbour and taken over by Monika Lipišč as the new curator in 2017), which essentially functioned as a continually growing web-based exhibition of works by international artists experimenting with video forms influenced by Internet-specific modes of narration, but also materialised in physical space. Meanwhile, Klimašauskas developed a similar format in what he called ‘exhibitions in a video’ – Portals and A Hat Trick Or A Theory Of The Plankton (both 2016), the difference being that in his case these exhibitions took the form of a web-like montage of contributions by individual authors within a single video. While these works could easily function purely online, they also materialised as physical gallery displays on several occasions.

The aforementioned forms of online exhibitions that were equivalent to and adaptable as ‘real’ shows received considerable visibility in Lithuania and internationally – at least in the contemporary and postinternet art circles. As such, they undoubtedly preshadowed the miscellaneous pandemic-era attempts at devising web-based alternatives for the traditional gallery and museum exhibitions that temporarily could not accept visitors.

3. RESPONSES TO THE LOCKDOWN: FROM RELUCTANT ENTHUSIASM TO DIGITAL FATIGUE

Although the pandemic and the preventive lockdown certainly came as a shock to most artists and cultural institutions, they also triggered an obvious surge in creativity and inventiveness with regard to adapting to the inevitable need of taking most of the operations online. While arguably not out of their own will, cultural workers earnestly took to exploring the possibilities provided by the available digital technologies. Abundant overviews and ‘best and worst’ ratings in online art magazines detailed the new developments and, for many, first digital experiences intended to compensate for the gap in the physical art life: online viewing rooms, immersive and navigable digital exhibitions, interactive applications and VR platforms. These overviews shared an emphasis on the unprecedented nature of the ‘new virtual reality’ faced by the art world, thus begging a question of whether the lockdown situation really introduced a qualitatively rather than quantitatively different state of things with regard to the forays into web-based artistic practice. To be sure, there were also some comments from early adopters expressing surprise at the fact that ‘so many who didn’t have any interest in virtual reality are now keen on understanding its capabilities’, while before the pandemic ‘the digital space was almost always treated as an afterthought for expanding an audience beyond the reach of physical spaces’ (Feinstein 2020). One critical comment that particularly stands out is by the new media artist Brian Mackern:

At first, it looked very promising that everything had to go online. Being part of the old net.art movement, I thought that many new ways of experimenting with the web would arise and shine. I expected that new generations of designers, programmers, entrepreneurs, and artists who grew up already immersed in this physical/virtual world would come up with some revolutionary ideas but in the end, you see that everything is stuck on the idea of the internet as
a publishing platform. There are not many visions about what’s under the hood. And ‘the new’ looks a bit like ‘the old,’ just refurbished. (in Bosma, 2021, 18)

Overall, however, the prevailing message was that the pandemic unveiled a completely new era of experiencing art digitally. International organisations and policy bodies encouraged cultural institutions to take advantage of the pandemic as an opportunity, devising alternative modes of action as well as educational and dissemination tools. For instance, the British Council stated that the lockdown in the region of Wider Europe encompassing Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, the South Caucasus, Western Balkans, Central Asia and Israel ‘broke new digital ground for cultural organisations’, contributing to ‘digital democratisation and innovation’ (De Braekeleer and Thomas 2020), while UNESCO commended museums for having exhibited tremendous resilience by continuing, amidst this global health crisis, to serve the public through free online exhibitions, making available digitized copies of ancient manuscripts and effectively engaging with citizens on social media’ (UNESCO 2020).

However, the tone of many other remarks on the impact of the pandemic on the arts was markedly different. Individual professionals, organisations and international campaigns expressed concerns about cultural workers not being recognised as providers of essential services and therefore exempt from lockdown restrictions, or the importance of culture being downplayed during the crisis, as well as about the potential reinforcement of individualism and erosion of communal cohesion by individual digital as opposed to live group cultural consumption (Etxebarria 2020). There was also an emerging discussion of the phenomenon of online or digital fatigue resulting from both uncertainty of the future and excess of online creative content that decreased the audiences’ motivation to participate in virtual events (Wright 2021). Geert Lovink, an initial advocate and later outspoken critic of online culture, summarised this effect of confinement to online communication in his in-depth analysis of ‘Zoom fatigue’, which he concluded as follows:

After the Covid siege, we will proudly say: we survived Zoom. Our post-digital exodus needs no Zoom vaccine. Let us not medicalize our working conditions. [...] we must now fight for the right to gather, debate and learn in person. We need a strong collective commitment to reconvene ‘in real life’ – and soon. For it is no longer self-evident that the promise to meet again will be fulfilled. (Lovink, 2020)

These concerned or sceptical voices suggest that the imperative to take advantage of the forced virtualisation of cultural life is far from being unanimously acknowledged as a sustainable and adequate solution to the problem – and that the idealistic approach to online creative exchange once propagated by the net art and new media art community can hardly work in this situation.

In the Lithuanian context, the initial response was similar in its enthusiastic search for virtual ways out of the situation. The earliest and most basic solution by the community of traditional visual art professionals and amateurs was to launch a Facebook page entitled Not Cancelled Openings (initiated by the artist Vilmantas Dambruškas) for sharing work that could not be presented in planned or potential physical exhibition. Major art institutions adopted the format of prefilmed virtual exhibition openings published on their social media. The theatre community experimented with Zoom plays, with a standout more advanced solution devised by the young director Augastas Gornatkevičius who staged his new 2021 production The Flicker as a 4-day interactive performance on Facebook in collaboration with the young media artist Gytis Dovydačius. Later same year, Dovydačius and a few fellow-minded media art students launched on:real, an online platform dedicated to what they referred to as ‘real virtuality’ (in line with the earlier postinternet rhetoric of the merging of online and offline modes in augmented reality environments, Internet of things and the like). Surprisingly, however, the platform was promoted as being practically the sole Lithuanian project dedicated to internet-based art, with no recognition of earlier efforts such as Institutio Media. Meanwhile, the contemporary art community took advantage of the heightened attention to the Internet with two new digital art and moving image streaming platforms, High Limits (launched by Robertas Narkus’ artist-run space Autarkia) and springs.video (initiated by Valentinias Klimašauskas) . These built upon the aforementioned developments in exhibiting video online of the 2010s with new web functionality.

With the second wave of the pandemic, however, initial enthusiasm predominantly gave way to the pessimistic ‘No Culture No Future’ sentiment. In a 2021 online discussion on virtual culture, Juozapas Blažūnas, head of the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, remarked that while virtual consumption of culture broadened the audiences’ horizons, there was a widespread desire to return to live culture, coupled with the older generation’s rejection of virtual culture as such. Other discussion participants – the aforementioned media practitioner Gytis Dovydačius and head of the Rupert centre for art and education Julija Reklaitė – added that artists themselves often lacked visionary approaches to innovative online presentation of their work, and attached the superfluous ‘virtual’ label to mere online publishing of documentation of traditional offline works or live
performances. According to Reklaitė, however, even with the eventual return to live cultural consumption the technological expertise and skills gained during the lockdown would continue to be useful as auxiliary tools.28

Regardless of optimism or scepticism, it must be stressed again that the rhetoric around the new initiatives and their significance involved no references to earlier local discourse and practices. This may imply that it was either largely unknown to the wider art community and the younger generation of artists, or deemed irrelevant in the new circumstances, in which the ultimate desire was a return to the ‘normal state’ of live cultural activities and physical art spaces, rather than further development and legitimation of their virtual substitutes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In response to the ‘No Culture No Future’ slogan popularised during the COVID-19 pandemic by cultural workers demanding a lift of the lockdown restrictions as providers of services essential to the well-being of society, there are a few things to be said about the implications of both ‘culture’ and ‘future’ in this phrase.

Firstly, it can be argued that the pre-pandemic digital technology-related movements of net art/new media art and postinternet art both revolved precisely around specific visions of a future. For new media activists, a more open, inclusive and empowering future depended on the radically democratic use of networked digital technology for communication and creativity that could overcome social divisions and build new autonomous creative communities. For the postinternet circles, the future was already here, brought about by the Internet that was no longer a possibility, but rather the actual substance of almost all experience, equally ‘online’ and ‘offline’, as all activities were influenced by and sieved through it in one way or another. The pandemic has shown, however, that for many people the future may not be associated with media technologies at all, as it has become clear that without the ‘real life’ counterpart they induce a sense of confinement and deprivation instead of providing an adequate substitute or a liberating alternative, no matter how much the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ life may have been blurred by the technological and ideological advancement of the recent decades. One of the lessons of the pandemic is that the line is still there, even if it is negligible when we have the luxury to be anywhere (i. e. not in self-isolation) – and that the future desired by most people may not be where the net culture enthusiasts imagined it to be.

The same holds true for the understanding of ‘culture’ prevalent in the arts and culture field. With more than three decades of technophilic experiments in mediated, telematic and cybernetic culture, once it became an uncalled-for pervasive and compulsory reality, it acquired dystopian features for many. The pandemic has revealed that a large-scale ‘digital turn’ imposed on the entire arts and culture sector can only generate enthusiasm and creativity for a limited period, while the notion of culture entrenched in the collective psyche largely remains conservative and based on conventional forms of live, face-to-face activities. It remains to be seen how the use of online production and/or dissemination of art will evolve after any kind of ‘normalisation’ of life. In the recent years, blockchain-powered cryptoart and NFTs seem to be transforming the art market, but it is unclear whether the general art world and the audiences will be receptive to art forms reliant on further abstraction and virtualisation of the processes of art creation and distribution.29

As for the general awareness of the long-term technological and discursive developments of the international art and technology community, epitomised by such festivals as Ars Electronica, ISEA and transmediale, organisations like V2_Lab for Unstable Media or Institute of Network Culture, and online mailing list communities of nettime and Rhizome, the evident conclusion is that even within the professional art field their impact is very limited or practically nonexistent. This is suggested by the near-total lack of recognition of this community’s experience as a valuable and voluntary precursor to the unforeseen challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the sensationalist rhetoric around the supposedly ground-breaking innovations in artistic practices it prompted, which in fact have numerous precedents that are largely omitted from the mainstream contemporary art history on the grounds of their putative technofetishism. Instead of acknowledging online creativity as a once-desired, familiar ‘future of the past’ and critically putting it to use in the new situation, the art and culture world responded to the latter mostly by reinventing what was already there.

5. REFERENCES


produce, consume and relate to nature. But we too often fail to realise that culture is both a source of inspiration and a means of realising our thoughts and ideas, that culture makes it possible to mend the social fabric, to forge new forms of solidarity, to create new spaces in which to draw the energy needed to meet together the intense challenges facing us.’

See the full statement of the #Culture2030Goal campaign here: http://culture2030goal.net/?page_id=527
For instance, Lithuanian writer Dalia Staponkuté claims that only live culture can ensure critical thinking, while virtual culture produces a dystopian virtual reality that obliterates local cultural memory.


See more: http://digitalmuseums.at; Bosma 2021; Mak et al. 2021; Kantor et al. 2021; Lovink 2020.

For examples see Feinstein 2020.

See also the critical follow-up to Bishop’s article: Cornell and Droitcour 2013, Shanken 2015.

See Heidenreich 2016.

The original website is archived at http://www.o-o.lt/1998

http://www.o-o.lt/e_descript.html

http://www.o-o.lt/manifesto.html

See http://www.7md.lt/archvyas.php?leid_id=544&amp;str_id=616 (in Lithuanian)

http://www.vilma.cc/jutempus/?p=22

http://www.vilma.cc/jutempus/?p=67#more-67


http://www.vilma.cc/jutempus/?cat=9

http://thegoodneighbour.lt


See http://selectedletters.lt/miscellaneous-readings-videos-etc

See http://artviewer.org/a-hat-trick-or-a-theory-of-the-plankton-at-podium

For some examples see:


