

Nikunja's Xanadu – The contemporary Dream Temple

Interactive Matter: Expanded Perception between the Analogue and the Digital

by David Simon-Vermot

*Interactivity usually is defined by an effect, or the succession of effects. They are perceived binary, linear and on one timeline. In the course of the last 20 years Swiss-French Artist Nikunja developed the artistic and philosophic concept of **Interactive Matter** as a fundament for artistic, natural and spiritual evolution and relates to the comprehension of interaction as matter to be creatively formulated and experienced. **Interactive Matter** is perceived as a multilayered dynamic field environment in a static condition of time and volume between zero and infinite, simultaneously macro- and micro-cosmic. Nikunja's artwork allows the direct experience of **Interactive Matter** as spreading between analog and digital reality.*

***Interactive Matter** is the totality of tension, space, rejection, and attraction emerging in the present between two or multiple objects, subjects, materials, ideas, causalities, histories, media, universes, worlds, personalities, etc. on a physical, psychological and spiritual level.*

*This concept constitutes together with 'Split Authority', 'Temporary Autonome Zone' and 'Transposition (Wandel) as position of orientation' the basic principles of Nikunja's artwork as such and thus for his current artistic project **Xanadu – the contemporary dream temple**: A multilayered transmedial and interactive installation that places the participator/user at an interface between digital technology and analogue experience. As a multimedial, mobile installation, Xanadu relates to dreams as an extended form of perception and individual creative potential, reaching into and interrogating our state of wakefulness, usually perceived as static and clearly distinct. The installation is comprised of a four channel cinematographic projection and an eight channel sound composition inside of a 200-squaremeter mobile bamboo structure, at its centre an art-installation of a bed-shrine in lava-stone and copper, two large scale paintings on glass and various objects.*

The installations title is based upon the name of the Summer residence of the Chinese emperor Khublai Khan¹: A governmental building whose structure was wholly based on a dream of the ruler of the largest empire of human history, in which he envisioned his future palace.² Besides the monumental building, a nomadic pavilion was utilized on the emperors many journeys. Being reported by Marco Polo to consist of bamboo, this pavilion serves as template for the installation's mobile structure, which was designed by the German architect Marcus Heinssdorf.

¹ *The Mongol Empire – A Historical Encyclopedia*, Timothy May, Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2016. S. 164.

² *Dreams as subject matter are historically correlated with the name 'Xanadu' in more ways than one: S.T Coleridge's "Khubla Khan – or a vision in a dream" has been created after Coleridge read Marco Polos account of Xanadu. He himself dreamt of the beautiful palace of the emperor and upon awakening, decided to write a poem dedicated to his oneiric impressions.*

Within the framework of Nikunja's Xanadu the participator finds himself immersed in digital cinematographic projections – two of them in real-time – which, being the only light source in the space, constantly redefine the space by their light in color and brightness. Together with the sounds, the central art object of the bed-shrine, the paintings on glass and his own movements, this multilayered immersive environment conveys to the participant an enlarged self-awareness and perception. It creates and cultivates associative sensory and intellectual impressions, related to each user's life-experience and psychic condition, that could be defined as 'open-ended poetry on an infinite timeline' determined by the immediateness of the 'Here and Now'.

*These associative cinematographic formulations are comparable to the fluid experience of dreams and their detachment of regular logic, time and space orientation. In this sense, Nikunja's Xanadu bridges digital media to dream-perception and the analogue body (the physical body) to the self-awareness of the participant. But contrary to video-games and 'augmented reality', it clearly puts **the full authority of the recipient in his analog reality in the centre of the evolving narrative of the experience**, frees inside of the subjective fragment the awareness of an universal All, inside of the individual the interconnective social and cultural, beyond the historical and societal structure of any convention. The seemingly exclusive autocracy of the digital (as for any media) is merged, in the experience, to the dominant analogon of the user's biological reality and its intellectual and spiritual components.*

Walter Benjamin envisioned a cinema that is consciously used as tool for the "awakening from the history as dream". He focused on the peculiar relationship of moving image, oneiric exploration and the subsequent experience of awakening, with the intention to provoke and enable revolutionary developments in the collective social consciousness. As such, Benjamin emphasized the social relevance of the purposeful use of cinema as a means to change perception: „Film is able to detach an object from tradition, to emancipate it from ritual and to produce a renewal / actualization of the object and of humanity.“³ In the present context, the notion of object is importantly expanded into the media-reality of performance, both, on screen (actors) and off screen (users).

*Nikunja's Xanadu bears a strong connection to said perspective: This reflects in the precise use of the moving image as multifaceted, existential matter betwixt vision and memory, between presence and death. The associative flow of images and consciousness enables a creative dynamic comparable to a natural form of self-hypnosis or meditation: The experience of dreams in the awakened state and sensations shifting between the (perceived) presence and absence of corporality. Xanadu's principle of inbetweenness, which is based on the theory of **Interactive Matter**, enables a detachment from every-day consciousness and allows the participator to realize, that dreams are not only present while being asleep, but exact their influence in all other states of mind. It contrasts the multifaceted qualities of human consciousness with the often manipulative and mono-dimensional imageries of 'everyday-life' and analytical logic. Based on this approach, **Interactive Matter** allows the conscious appropriation of the images by the user, and thus permits his full authority, freedom and responsibility to act.*

³ Awakening Images: Walter Benjamin's Concepts of History, Technology and Film, Daniel Mourenza, Paper – University of Leeds. S. 3.

The installation's emphasis on states-in-between and the above mentioned aesthetic theory allow furthermore to contemplate the idea of liminality: While its origins are to be found in the work of Arnold van Gennep, it is Victor Turner who majorly influenced this concept of change and transformation.⁴ Denoting a state "betwixt and between"⁵ the framework of the rites of passage, Turner understands liminality as a phase of evolutive potential, where an individual separation from the social norms and cultural values takes place. While separation from prevailing customs might be the outward appearance of this temporary "threshold-experience", it is – on the other hand – an opportunity to forge new interpersonal bonds and relationships, beyond what the respective society would deem as fitting and appropriate. From this perspective, going beyond the horizon of what is accepted as right or wrong is a necessary step, if opportunities for (societal) change are to be taken to heart. This aspect is of clear significance for Nikunja's Xanadu: The art-project's liminal qualities are such, that they create a space in between the binary cultural code of right / wrong, good / bad, true / false, and thus generate an experience of Otherness, or 'a Third', necessary for the evolution and transformation of the Self and civilization as such.

Interrogating and stimulating awareness of the Self and/in the Universe beyond the known, the task of art since the dawn of humanity, Nikunja's work references in recent philosophical and psychiatric science as Perl's Gestalt-therapy and the resulting field-theory, and Deleuze/Guattari's Anti-Oedipus and their encounter of the contemporary society's schizophrenia and their formulation of the organ less body, which can be understood as the contemporary societal form of Nikunja's Interactive Matter.

*As **Interactive Matter** encompasses the tension within the different 'thresholds' of spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual developments, phenomenology, enlarged field-theory, the organ-less body, schizophrenia of capitalism, Plato's 5th element and Renate Quehenberger's animated theoretical geometry in Quantum Cinema, the discovery of 'Dark Matter' in the Universe, appear to be fitting scientific and cultural references uniting in it to a magma of evolutive awareness and enlarged understanding of the universe and human kind.*

*Directing the gaze back to the domain of art proper, the concept of **Temporary Autonomous Zone** - a term created by the anarchist philosopher Hakim Bey – may provide an alternative perspective on transmedial installations: The TAZ describes the possibility to establish separated and autonomous time-bound zones through artistic means.⁶ These are autonomous in the sense that they are not subject to the socio-cultural power structures and allow new ways of life and perception to flourish from the authority of the user at its determining center. While economic and governmental structures require a solid fundament and constant maintenance of authority outside of the subject, the TAZ's are transient, mobile, dynamic and designed to be experienced instead of analyzed, because it is determined from inside of its subjects. Thus these zones could be described as nomadic in essence and thus directly relating to Nikunja's Xanadu.*

⁴ *Media and Ritual*, Johanna Sumiala, London & New York: Routledge, 2013. S. 30.

⁵ Ebd.

⁶ TAZ – *Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Hakim Bey, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003 (1985). S.95.

While many interactive and relational artworks aim at a temporary embrace of the world and thus an acceptance of the 'status quo', not many venture into more demanding territories of artistic practice. To provoke a development in the consciousness of the participator and to lead towards the acknowledgement of his/her own perceptive authority may be considered a daring task indeed: Xanadu as a Temporary Autonomous Zone enables to reach for those goals – not in the future but the present. Yet as a mobile 'temple without religion' it is also to be comprehended as a source of inspiration, power and regeneration; therefore may lead to experiences, impressions and thoughts that can be transferred into the 'every-day-life' of the user. Through this dynamic of immersion, change and inspiration Nikunja's Xanadu makes 'the unknown', the striving for its discovery and the development of consciousness part of contemporary art – thus may contribute to its evolution.