

The article studies the relationship between the idea of the avant-garde, the theatre dispositive and the creative opus of Marko Peljhan (particularly his project *Makrolab*) which was conceptualised and carried out around the turn of the millennium (1997–2007).

The disintegration of the European socialisms after 1989 took place in synergy with the revolution of telecommunications and the expansion of neoliberalism, which caused new forms of neo-colonial global territorialisation and new forms of warfare, characterised by “the occupation of the skies” (Mbembe) or the production and control of the “electromagnetic data oceans and signal territories” (Eshun). The war in the territories of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, in the time of overabundant information, revealed the contradiction between the lack of information about the factors that realistically influence local events and the information transmitted to individuals through the theatre dispositive of contemporary media. The article shows that Peljhan's creative opus is motivated by reflecting this contradiction, which is realised within the *Makrolab* and other projects (particularly in a series of projects named *Resolucije* [Resolutions]) with a tactical use and redefinition of military technologies in the context of the art system. The author asserts that through the confrontation of art and war, Peljhan reaffirms the idea of the avant-garde, which in the conditions of the transition from the 20th to the 21st century can only be reflected as a replication of the avant-garde problems in the frame of contemporary warfare.

Keywords: avant-garde, theatre, *Makrolab*, tactical media, military technology

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Feelings and Territories: *Makrolab's* Avant-Garde Inquiries

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PART I: The idea of the avant-garde

Banned from view

The need for concentration resulted in the peep show or “picture frame,” today the “universal” form of the stage (Oscar Schlemmer, “Men and Art Figure” 21).

Less than 100 years ago Oskar Schlemmer described the prototype of the theatre of the future. In “Men and Art Figure”, he introduced the idea of *Schaubühne* (show-stage) and portrayed it as an absolute visual and mobile stage that operates as a perpetual “kaleidoscopic play [of] at once infinitely variable and strictly organized” stage elements. In this “mechanistic organism”, as he called it, a living man would be “banned from view”. On the stage, man will be replaced with the *Kunstfigur* (art figure) while the living theatre agents (actor, director, viewer, etc.) will be merged into a composite entity of “the perfect engineer”. Schlemmer envisioned a perfect engineer as standing in front of “the central switchboard from where he would direct this feast for the eyes (22)”. This avant-garde prototype – reflecting early 20th-century desires to break the resistance of solid matter and achieve the sensation of pure, gravity-free, floating abstraction – gradually proliferated into the images, relations, technologies and mechanisms of our lived historical world. Our contemporary experiences of the world and relationships among people became forever redefined by the development of telecommunications and ever-increasing human dependence on the mechanical and electronic instruments that organise people’s interactions with their immediate and distant environments. What were once radical avant-garde visions have become the norms of our present-day reality.

Schlemmer’s prototype remains radical as an artistic idea precisely in its demand for the integration of once separated theatre functions into an ambivalent figure of a “perfect engineer” and as such continues to signify as a metaphor. At present we are, like perfect engineers, collectively divided between participation in arenas of life-stage and exterior positions of permanent observers, standing behind the switchboards, from where we can presumably explore, enjoy and control the world out there – available to us through its instant and constant virtualisation. The reality

of the condition outlined in Schlemmer's avant-garde prototype, however, holds in itself some disturbing contradictions: while new technologies of vision allow people to see more, they also imply new ways of being seen. Captured in an endless *mise en abyme*, each perfect engineer can gaze forever into infinite successions of dislocated images and events – inaccessible to the naked eye or experiencing body – but is in turn also always seen, exposed and consumed as a virtual entity and “feast for the eyes” of an invisible totality.

Makrolab 1997-2007

What keeps them staring into the monitors, tapping keyboards, murmuring to each other, reaching for the laptop to the left, the mouse to the right, checking the network hub stacked in the recess, leaning over for the Gramm CDR, steering a course around the compacted, untidy, compressed, slipshod mess of the Lab?
(Kodwo Eshun 6)

Makrolab – a project conceptualised by Marko Peljhan and carried out in collaboration with various other individuals between 1997 and 2007 – emerged from two defining parameters: the ideas associated with avant-garde art (especially theatre) and the experience of the new types of warfare that appeared at the end of the Cold War era.¹ The project was conceptualised as an autonomous communications, research and living platform, capable of sustaining the concentrated work of 4 people in extreme weather conditions for up to 120 days. It was built as a 14-metre-long octagonal, mobile and self-sustainable structure (a hybrid between architecture, sculpture, stage and environment) that could travel around the globe, anchor itself and function in the most isolated and remote parts of the earth. From 1997, when the project was first installed on the top of a hill in Lutterberg, near Kassel, Germany, *Makrolab* changed its location five more times. The next stops were Rottneest Island, Australia (2000), Karst, Slovenia (2001), Blair Atholl Estate, Scotland (2002), Isola di Campalto/Venice, Italy (2003) and Santa Barbara, USA (2006). Between stops, the lab was set up in an overhaul situation where new and emerging technological systems and solutions were tested and incorporated. The lab was equipped with advanced technologies for receiving and sending electromagnetic signals (satellite, radio), from low and high frequencies to microwave, and was deliberately set up in isolation – a situation in which the participant researchers could only observe the world through machinic media, that is, outside of their daily routines and social relations developed in the environment of the lab itself. The focus of the research was distributed between three main dynamic fields: weather and climate, telecommunications, and migrations,

¹ Peljhan's initial collaborators working with him on the architecture of the lab were Jurij Krpan, Boštjan Hvala and Goran Šalamon, who worked on the static calculations and structural plans. The first structure was constructed in the workshop of Jože Miklič. A much larger group of people collaborated on different versions of the project.

understood as migrations of people, flora, fauna and money economies. The other field of interest for the *Makrolab* was the exchange of energy, understood in physical and social terms.

For 10 years, the living unit and lab were constantly refurbished, with new technologies and solutions proposed and implemented. In 1999, *Makrolab* changed its “skin” from an inflatable orange-white structure to a silver-coloured polycarbonate multi-layered insulation panel. It also enlarged its housing capacities from four to six inhabitants. The use of solar technologies and water recycling systems improved the energy and food production from one move to another. During the last years, the lab could officially host up to 8 people although at times more than 20 people worked and lived on it and its extended nomadic settlements. The so-called “insulation/isolation strategy”, as defined by Peljhan in his text from 2003 had been applied to the lab’s construction, energy and food production, and, most importantly, to its social structure based on the premise that a “small number of people in an enclosed space, in totally dynamic and very intense communication with each other, can produce more evolutionary code than larger social systems” (Peljhan, “Lecture” 107).

Regardless of how deep we dive into the complex assemblages generated by *Makrolab* during its operative years, the first question asserting itself is how to view, experience and think about it as an artwork, especially after knowing that it was conceived and presented as such? The project came to life as a result of Peljhan’s early theatre and performance experiments in Slovenia between 1990 and 1996 (described in the second part of this essay) and Catherine David’s 1996 selection of *Makrolab* for the *documenta X* exhibition (1997). David made her choice based on the conceptual outline and programmatic schemata of the project. In addition to a loan that Peljhan secured from a bank, she provided the initial funding for its realisation and installment on Lutterberg hill above Kassel. At the actual *documenta X* exhibition’s “non-site”, *Makrolab* was represented by the *Makrolab Console*, with its built-in radio system that enabled visitors to get in contact with the people working at the lab via VHF radio, the meta-textual archive of the project on microfiches and the project description with instructions for how to visit the actual site if they were interested.² Other than the lab’s quite attractive appearance – emphasised by the contrast between the high-tech mobile construction and the surrounding nature – visitors of the site could also see a grouping of “perfect engineers” hanging around the monitors and switchboards placed inside of the mobile unit, navigating a visual and mobile theatre of the end of the century’s televisual era. They could talk to them or just wonder to themselves, as Kodwo Eshun said: What is it that keeps all these people “staring into monitors, tapping keyboards, murmuring to each other, reaching for the laptop to the left, the

² In relation to the art world, *Makrolab* used the avant-garde strategy articulated by Robert Smithson in his proposition of site vs. non-site dialectics (*Collected Writings*, pp. 242–52, 364).

mouse to the right, checking the network hub stacked in the recess, leaning over for the Gramm CDR, steering a course around the compacted, untidy, compressed, slipshod mess of the Lab? (Eshun 6)” What is the nature of this “feast for the eyes” that they are gazing at and what are the reasons for their retreat into such isolated living conditions, which provide neither comfort nor basic privacy?

Technically speaking, *Makrolab* did not need spectators. All it needed were participants. During its years of operation, it would function out of its own autonomous drive, even if nobody from the outside would look at it and think about it as an artwork. Would it have a viable economic existence outside of the art world or how else could it sustain itself? If we think about it as an artwork, the next question is what kind of artwork is it? Is it Sculpture? Architecture? Performance art? Conceptual art? New media art? Surveillance art? Data aesthetics? Relational-aesthetics? Or, as Brian Holmes, asking these same questions wondered in his essay “Coded Utopia”: “Is it a nomadic war machine, or a theater to replay history? (85)” These questions are *Makrolab*'s avant-garde inquiries that need to be approached one by one, although *Makrolab* could be all that and more. Among other things, *Makrolab* is certainly also a theatre that replayed the history of avant-garde theatre.

The avant-garde and measure

If today's arts love the machine, technology and organization, if they aspire to precision and reject anything vague and dreamy, this implies an instinctive repudiation of chaos and a longing to find the form appropriate to our times. (Oskar Schlemmer, “Letters” 193)

What is the measure of the qualifier avant-garde? Measuring avant-garde art with art historical methodologies is a modernist approach, which inevitably fractures the continuity of the idea into styles and taxonomies that always seemed forced if not obsolete. If we wish to give the avant-garde idea a chance in the conditions of the late 20th and early 21st century we have to, as Sven-Olov Wallenstein proposed in “Transformative Technologies”, think and measure it, first, within the continuity of avant-garde problems rather than solutions, and second, within the frontiers of contemporary warfare. The very concept of avant-garde, Wallenstein claims, “has always tended to imply linear conception, a troop advancing ahead, going beyond a front line stretched out before us in a terrain that is essentially already known”. Furthermore, the avant-garde was not only trying to invent new alternative possibilities in a known matrix of social life, it was also deeply involved with the paradoxes connected to the limits of human perception in relation to what remains external to human knowledge and its imagination. Hence, if we want to catch up with

the idea of the avant-garde today, we have, as I will demonstrate in the case of Pelhan's *Makrolab*, to contemplate it through the continuity of avant-garde questions and through the spatial-temporal matrices of contemporary warfare.

One of the key questions raised by avant-garde art of the past was precisely the question of measure, calculability and reducibility of life in relation to that which evades calculation, mechanisation and reduction and thus remains external to our knowledge and modes of virtualisation. The idea of the avant-garde is driven by the contradictory desire to push the frontiers of knowledge further and further in order to rediscover that which cannot be known and thus remains beyond the current frontiers of intelligibility. Avant-garde prototypes from the beginning of the 20th century put forward many problems and models that only obliquely correspond with the avant-garde prototypes of the second part of the century and beyond.

A case in point is Schlemmer's *Kunstfigur* and the limits of the human body in cubic space. In "Man and Art Figure", Schlemmer studied the relation between the Cartesian space, based on the strictly organised vertical-horizontal lines of measurement defined by a coordinate system, and organic human figure. In so doing, he reached the conclusion that the human agent does not fit naturally into cubic space. Thinking about solutions to this within the experimental framework of stage art, Schlemmer foresaw three possibilities of organising or thinking this impossible relation: "either abstract space is adapted in deference to natural man", which "happens in the theater of illusionistic realism", or, Schlemmer continues, "natural man, in deference to abstract space, is recast to fit its mold"(17).³ Yet there is also the third option, which Schlemmer mentions in passing: we simply recognise that which cannot be solved within either of the two existing options. In exploring the second possibility further Schlemmer came to the conclusion that more than an actor, the abstract stage of the industrial era requires a man-dancer (*Tänzersench*), and more than spoken word, expressing the performer's social and psychological relations to the world, an abstract stage would be fit to express humanity's "invisible inner self", which is paradoxically represented by somatic qualities, such as "heartbeat, circulation, respiration, the activities of the brain and nervous system" (Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure" 25).

The further Schlemmer explored the ideal mobility of humanity's "inner self" within the physical parameters of the abstract stage, the more he became aware that the abstract stage requires fracturing (and recasting) the unity of the organic human form. Gravity, Schlemmer stated, prevents the organic human figure from overcoming its purely physical limitations and achieving the freedom of movement that would adequately express the movement of a human's inner flows. Only acrobats,

³ Schlemmer writes: "A further emblem of our time is mechanization, the inexorable process which now lays claim to every sphere of life and art. Everything which can be mechanized is mechanized. The result: Our recognition of that which can *not* be mechanized" (17).

contortionists or the “living geometry of the aerialist” – not even dancers – can to a certain extent overcome physical limitations. Schlemmer’s conclusion was that the desire to “free man from his physical bondage and heighten his freedom of movement beyond his native potential” requires the substitution of the organic figure with the mechanical *Kunstfigur* already envisioned by E.T.A. Hoffman’s *automaton* or Henrich von Kleist’s marionette theatre. This historical connection thus underlines the tradition of avant-garde fascination with the projection of the imperfect complex self into a perfectly trivial double.

One hundred years before Schlemmer, Kleist also investigated the relation between the operator and the marionette in puppet theatre through the dialogue with the professional dancer. He asked a professional dancer if “he thought the operator who controls these puppets should himself be a dancer or at least have some idea of beauty in the dance?” (“On the Marionette” 23). The dancer responded by pointing out an almost negligible connection between the beauty of the marionette’s movements and the movements of the operator’s soul. It is the operator’s desire to be a marionette that gives the latter its perfection. Hence, a perfect manipulator of marionette theatre transposes his desire into the marionette’s virtual centre of gravity and thus dances with it on a virtual realm. In other words, the operator – occupying the position of Schlemmer’s perfect engineer – dances through the agency of the marionette. Although the traces of his dance are visible only through the doll, the operator’s soul is reverse choreographed through the movements of the marionette that he manipulates. As I will demonstrate later on, this paradoxical mechanism of desire that always leaves the desiring subject out of the picture corresponds with the essence of *Makrolab*.

These old avant-garde prototypes can serve us as our present-day cybernetic metaphors, which in a stunning way outline the feedback loops and control mechanisms of human desire. In “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, Gilles Deleuze remarked that the “types of machines are easily matched with the types of societies” (6). Contrary to what we might imagine, this is not because machines determine and repressively organise human and social environments, but because machines are already expressions of our motives and desires. This is why we were able to imagine and produce them and wish to use them in the first place. Throughout history different generations of machines have affected human subjectivity. Schlemmer’s epoch desired and invented prototypes of dynamic spaces that soon became concrete spaces of everyday social interaction. The “mold” for the spatial order of Schlemmer’s future was cast into Allan Kaprow’s or Guy Debord’s historic present. That spatial order was organised neither like 19th-century illusionistic theatre nor like an abstract stage, but as an integrated spatio-temporal control mechanism that was only unconsciously displayed in Kleist’s and Schlemmer’s avant-garde prototypes. Deleuze articulated the character of the new spatio-temporal dynamic that emerged in the

second half of the 20th century through the differential comparison between “mold” and “modulation.” Former spaces of enclosure, he said, “are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (4). The demand to blur the divide between art and life pronounced by the post-WWII avant-garde thus reaffirmed the validity of Schlemmer’s model by bringing the entire modulating platform (abstract stage + the incalculable exteriority of the perfect engineer behind the switchboard) into a renewed focus of avant-garde inquiry. These inquiries were profoundly affected by the new means of warfare developed at the outset of the Cold War and that transformed military strategies in the same way that they transformed the ways of life by capturing them in a ubiquitous yet seemingly invisible militarisation of everyday life.

Art as Information Processing System

[A]rt is an archaic information processing system, characteristically Byzantine rather than inefficient. (Jack Burnham 27)

Nobody better described the shift in avant-garde measure than Jack Burnham in his essays of the late 1960s in which he examined what was “left of the avant-garde” within the contexts of new scientific developments supported by Cold War military interests (*Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art*). Philosophically and technically supported by new sciences such as cybernetics and systems theory, and by new machines such as satellite technology and computers, the new military thinking consciously integrated art together with other cultural practices into the strictures of contemporary warfare and thus pushed avant-garde frontiers outside the domain of what was previously defined as art. From the standpoint of cybernetics, Burnham stated, “art is an archaic information processing system” and so “programming the art system involves some of the same features found in human brains and in large computer systems” (27). Unpacking this cybernetic analogy further, he saw artists performing the role of programs (preparing new codes, analysing data and making works of art) that are supervised by “metaprograms” (knowledge, organisational structures, art history and criticism, museums, archives – in sum, the art world) while metaprograms are susceptible to art’s self-metaprograms which reorganise the goals of art on a long-term basis according to new conditions. According to Burnham, art’s self-metaprogram “operates as an undetected overseer, establishing strategies on all lower levels in terms of societal needs” (27). The shift in art’s self-metaprogramming that Burnham sensed in the American art scene of the 1960s and 1970s was the sign of a vital avant-garde at work, this time strongly focused on the definition of art and how this definition is produced or changed within

the parameters of the newly acknowledged power of the art system (as one of the subsystems of contemporary power machines).

Technocracy, a new class shaped by the “evolving techno-structure” and skilled in managing information and “smoothly implementing social change”, militarised daily life in a seamless way without any palpable surface evidence (Burnham 15). As Paul Virilio stated in *Pure War*, without being aware of it, we all became civilian soldiers: “The great stroke of luck for the military class’s terrorism is that no one recognizes it. People don’t recognize the militarized part of their identity, of their consciousness” (18). According to Burnham, system analysts were the main assets of new Pentagon policies. Artists who thought about the new definitions of art in the context of militarised everyday existence had no choice but to start imitating systems practices and utilising the technologies of the technocracy in order to secure the avant-garde’s external position as “perfect engineer” (modified to “undetected overseer”) and to redefine the function of art to meet the emerging needs of society. In this sense, Allan Kaprow’s happenings theoretically and practically affirmed the position and role of systems analyst, while Robert Smithson’s earthworks built on the remote sensing of satellite data. These are just two examples from Burnham’s avant-garde map that are relevant to *Makrolab*’s micro and macro avant-garde inquiries.

The continuity of avant-garde questions and problems demonstrated in the paradigmatic examples that I am introducing here are related to my analysis of the *Makrolab* project since, from my point of view, these questions and these art projects are connected through the contradiction between the goals and the means to achieve these goals. Although in his “Man and Art Figure” essay he did not develop these thoughts any further, Schlemmer did not fail to notice that in the general trend that “mechanizes everything that can be mechanized”, the result should be “our recognition of that which can *not* be mechanized” (17). The same argument could be applied to the positions of Kaprow and Smithson: when everything can be broken up and liquefied into data flows, the goal should be our recognition of that which cannot be presented and distributed as data – that which by its nature remains outside of these flows. That which does and will always remain outside is not at all spectacular in and of itself since it is more or less the experience of our singular mortal existence, its limits and the immeasurability of the singularity of individual life. Taking upon themselves the bombastic roles of “perfect engineers” of the industrial era, or “undetected overseers” of the digital era, contemporary avant-garde artists, however, do not pursue the goals of the dominant relations of production; they rather take upon themselves the task of observing and showing how the dominant forces shape and affect us in unpredictable and undetectable ways. In other words, the avant-garde artists’ goal is to produce alternative ways of perceiving the existing conditions, and consequently, create environments or devices that will help us live outside the hegemonic measure systems.

The problem is that the exteriority of the war machine in relation to the State apparatus is everywhere apparent but remains difficult to conceptualize. (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 345)

Just as technologies invented 50 years ago have not radically change their core paradigms but have only expanded and intensified their presence in the world, avant-garde art's self-metaprograms (as Burnham defined this phenomenon) have not dramatically changed in the last 50 years. In the 1990s, computer and satellite technologies that were invented during the Cold War era enveloped the earth like the web of a giant insect proliferating everywhere from nowhere. "Since the beginning of the 1990s", Virilio writes, "the Pentagon appropriated the conviction that 'geo-strategical' planning can turn the whole planet inside out, like a glove" (*Information Bomb* 10). The Cartesian space of measure that was previously applied to the spaces of enclosure expanded into a modulating cartographic projection of the globe that is now frenetically calculated along both spatial and temporal axes in order to provide for maximal economic and military territorialisation of the planet. What dramatically changed since 1989 is the global world order that in effect reinstated certain historical and ideological programmes associated with the idea of avant-garde: its international pre-Cold war character; its association with totalitarian regimes; the geopolitical rifts caused by the Cold War and current views of the idea of avant-garde as a predominately Western liberal democratic asset.

The idea of avant-garde is frequently criticised and considered defunct due to its absorption by the culture industry and for being complicit with the neoliberal art system. Jack Burnham explains, however, that in the 1960s, avant-garde self-metaprogramming integrated the art system into the scope of avant-garde inquiries. Western artists and institutions cherish Marcel Duchamp's institutional and value based model of art above all other historic avant-garde models. Although the entire Western art system absorbed *Duchampian* intelligence into its authority, which today seems as unsurpassable as neoliberal empire, it also limited art's operations within art's own cultural and institutional boundaries. Among the vast amounts of art production circulating through the global art system, avant-garde art seems to be everywhere. At the same time, not everything is avant-garde art. The decision about what is avant-garde, or what could be avant-garde mostly depends on the criteria through which we examine or participate in art today. As Wallenstein contended, if we are interested in unearthing avant-garde problems rather than solutions we have to accept that "the avant-garde is neither alive nor dead, but always there, virtually, waiting to be redefined and reinvented anew" ("Transformative").

One way to shed light on the complex relation between the avant-garde *versus* the art system is to compare it to the correlated binary concepts of “nomadic war machine” and the “State apparatus” as employed by Deleuze and Guattari (D&G) in *A Thousand Plateaus* (350–423). The two agencies, war machine and State apparatus, operate over the same territories but they imprint the territories in a very different way, generating two distinct types of spaces: the smooth, heterogeneous spaces of the war machine against striated, homogeneous, Cartesian spaces of the State apparatus. Although the two agencies are co-dependent, they engage with one another through deadly antagonism as they operate according to two irreconcilable sets of rules. Just as the global apparatus of the State justifies its behaviour in relation to the rules established by modern nation states, the global art system plays according to the rules of art history (a nation state subsystem) which measures the value and meaning of new art propositions against the previously established art historic norms. For instance, in her 1979 text, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, Rosalind Krauss provided another brilliant reading of the same art scene that was the subject of Burnham’s essays. She defined the new art in the “expanded field” against traditionally defined forms of art such as sculpture, a norm against which she could measure the new deployments of art, or in Burnham’s view, the new self-metaprogramming. She used a mathematical tool, a Klein four-group semiotic square, to support her complex argument, proving that art in the 1960s and 1970s had moved far beyond the limits of what was accepted as art while still maintaining a sense of connection and continuity within art historical definitions (30–44). Like D&G’s State apparatus, art history seeks for ways to capture nomadic avant-garde innovations, transforming them to fit its needs of consolidation and control over state-art affairs. The State art system and nomadic avant-garde art need each other. They operate within the same field that, as D&G put it, “circumscribes its interiority in States, but describes its exteriority in what escapes States” or stands against them (361). Burnham and Krauss’s readings of the same art scene – the American art scene of the 1960s and 1970s – allows for two very different legacies that can be inherited by the contemporary art world. One is measured through the criteria of art history, which translates heterogeneous avant-garde ideas into homogeneous modernist solutions, and the other is measured through the criteria of technology and war intelligence, unearthing the continuity of avant-garde problems and thus defending the exteriority of its position.

The difference between modernism and the avant-garde, as defined by Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, is fundamental to this discussion and addresses the problem of means and ends. While modernism pursues the strategy of deviation from the norms and clichés of traditional artistic techniques, whether of writing, painting or theatre, avant-garde strategies target the heterogeneous social, cultural and natural fields and reject the main imperative of the modernist global art system – the imperative of involuntary de-politicisation. The current hegemonic art system

is coded for achieving the instant involuntary de-politicisation of everything that ends up within its State walls, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, for a very selective transubstantiation of something (which is no longer even an object, maybe just a semblance of it, preferably looking like an incomplete minimalist object, but more likely a set of controlled relations) into economic data (money). So how can one recognise and think about avant-garde art in the current society of control where, as Deleuze puts it, “even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank?” (6). In attempt to answer this question, I focus on the example of Peljhan’s *Makrolab* as well as some of his other projects that led to it. I relate these to the problems and questions having to do with the idea of avant-garde and the struggles inscribed in the D&G polarisation of the nomadic war machine against the State apparatus as it reveals itself in the post-1989 world.

PART II: Makrolab

Feelings and territories

[T]he ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. (Achille Mbembe 11)

Since 1968, Western thinkers have mourned the loss of the utopia of revolution. Many have given up the idea of the Left together with the idea of the avant-garde. In his earnest defence of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger admitted that, after 1968, he “transferred, without being conscious of it, utopian aspirations from a society in which they could clearly not be realised to theory. Theory now seemed to be the key that could keep open the door to the future that I imagined, along with Breton, as a finally livable world” (Bürger, “Avant-Garde” 698). In sum, avant-garde art, just as the political avant-garde of the 20th century, has lost the battle and failed to produce viable alternatives that would mediate the contradictions between art and life, and life and politics. Nowadays almost everything that matters is qualified as post – post-history, post-politics, post-communism, post-modernism, post-avant-garde – with the exception that there is no post-capitalism. As Peter Osborne argues, we are no longer in Fredric Jameson’s “late capitalism” of the 1980s but back in a fully restored imperialist “high capitalism” (Osborne, “Postconceptual Condition” 19–27). The difference is that today’s high capitalism is technologically equipped with the completely abstracted real-time high-frequency trading and exchange systems. These were still only emerging when Jack Burnham introduced his perception of new avant-garde as “systems esthetics”, an aesthetics that mimics and redirects the effects of technological illusionism and its imperative of control back towards life.⁴

⁴ Burnham’s essays “System Esthetics” and “Real Time Systems” were first published in *Artforum* in September 1968 and September 1969.

Enacted in 1992 and 1993 in Ljubljana's Museum of Modern Art (*Moderna Galerija*), Marko Peljhan's pre-*Makrolab* series of performances (*Egorhythms*) were a compelling summary of 20th-century avant-garde vocabularies and desires. They were driven by a naive desire to reassemble the idea of the avant-garde and reconnect it with the newly opened post-Cold War horizons. Composed as poetic assemblages and technocologies combining nature, cinema, sound, ecosystems and high technology, these performances were conceived as immersive environments that integrated avant-garde prototypes, such as Schlemmer's *Schaubühne*, in the form of a projection screen placed between two giant vent structures that functioned simultaneously as radar screens and wind-producing turbines. The projections were computer animations that were designed and composited specifically for the occasion. They featured some of the imagery and dynamics that would later come to define Peljhan's visual imaginary: world maps and communication traces inserted within black abstraction, a Malevichian black square that then turns into an abstract visual compositions, and dance movements that are indeed reminiscent of the early 1920s avant-garde stages and abstract theatre enactments. Peljhan himself, in the role of the perfect engineer was, when not performing, sitting in front of the screen, immersed in contemplation. In *Egorhythms* the exterior position of Schlemmer's perfect engineer – originally banned from view – was rearticulated into a closed environment embracing a director, performers, audience, tall trees and grass, a swarm of bees installed in a portal resembling an airport security check, and fish swimming in a giant tank. Performers were wrapped in a web of sensors and were equipped with contact microphones and touch sensors that amplified their movement and speech, which were integrated into an overall sound environment.⁵ There were also heaters and fans in the gallery space that produced wind and temperature shifts. As I understood it from the perspective of spectator, the idea behind these works was to take us on a virtual flight into a new type of consciousness based on the desire to create equilibriums between advanced technological and ecological systems, to create a space of negotiation between the imposition of new measures brought by the information era and the immeasurable leftover of the ecological world. The last event from the *Egorhythms* series was titled *Rhythmical Scenic Structure Atol (RSS Atol)*. It ended with the projection of a sequence of three photos that had recently been published in *Paris Match* magazine and featured a Serbian police officer in Brčko (northern Bosnia and Herzegovina) executing an unarmed citizen on the street in the middle of the day.⁶ This ending created a disorienting situation for the participants. It was hard to say when the performance came to a close and what we – the hostages of the situation – were expected to do.

5 The instrument that enabled this "amplified dance" was produced in collaboration with electronic engineers at the University of Ljubljana in a first of such collaborations that would later come to define Peljhan's extra-disciplinary collaborative approach.

6 The photos and other accumulated evidence were later used for the conviction and life imprisonment of this officer in the International Criminal Tribunal of the Former Yugoslavia.

Obviously the message was that we should acknowledge the existence of the war in the dismantled territories of Yugoslavia, which was not as obvious then as it might seem today. I experienced this event as part of a fundamental social transformation and therefore to this day associate *RSS Atol* with the feeling of loss of significant territories, not only in Yugoslavia, but with regard to broader 20th-century territories. The post-1989 dream of the 20th century's long awaited avant-garde future (both political and artistic) was over; the misplaced reality of the 21st century had begun.

Achille Mbembe has given the term “necropolitics” to a radicalised version of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics as it has been applied by the modern State apparatus to colonies (“Necropolitics” 11–40). Necropolitics took place *avant la lettre* in the Yugoslav war. Against all the efforts and expectations invested in the political and aesthetic avant-garde movements in Yugoslavia during the Cold War era, culminating in the vibrant political and artistic culture of the 1980s, the beginning of the new post-socialist and post-Cold War era was marked especially by the beginnings of CNN's live broadcasting of the Gulf War in 1990. What was shocking about CNN's live reporting about the Gulf War was that it was framed and packaged as a TV series, with the cover image and music announcing every new episode of this spectacular new type of real-time war. The U.S. Army was presented as a mythological force and the CNN journalists as heroes who were risking their lives to pass on the important news. The names of the military operations (Desert Shield and Desert Storm) sounded like the titles of Hollywood movies or video games. Everything about this conflict was a display of the obvious superiority of U.S. military technologies, including the daily broadcast of images taken by these weapons, usually during their terminal targeting phases, or in terms of the spectacle of the logistics of large-scale modern military operations.

The war in Yugoslavia started just a few months after the Gulf War in 1991, when Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence and installed signs to mark their new territorial borders. The so-called Ten-Day War in Slovenia began on 26 June 1991. It was a short prelude to a much larger conflict that expanded and took over the south-eastern parts of the country, first in Croatia and then with full force in Bosnia. The speed and efficacy that we were led to believe were the new norms of warfare were not applied in the Yugoslav war. Rather, we entered a long period of static destruction of cities, civilian populations and front lines, a process that resembled the First World War, which incidentally started in Sarajevo.

The insane nationalist conflicts between the former Yugoslav republics (with Serbia controlling the former Yugoslav People's Army against Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) escalated into what Gearóid Ó Tuathai described as a “long running nightmare of low-tech brutality, of thuggish terror, indiscriminate shelling and seemingly pre-modern siege warfare” (“Strategic Sign” 518). The attempts by the

international community to solve the Balkan crisis failed one after another. This created a highly chaotic situation in which the presence of international media elevated the Yugoslav war to the first but not last of the globalisation wars. The characteristic of globalisation wars is that they involuntarily hijack global audiences to participate in an overt necropolitics of the new sovereign power of global capital. The unsettling aspect of this new power is that it can insert itself in places that do not have clearly demarcated boundaries. As Mbembe insightfully spelled out regarding the rather ambiguous relation between D&G's State apparatus and war machine in a new stratification of power, the reconfigured State apparatus became as nomadic as war machines themselves and thus more difficult to locate despite its overt presence. Contemporary wars do not conquer territories *per se* but produce striated, controllable spaces by fracturing territories on the ground and homogenising them from the sky. The characteristic of what Mbembe calls "vertical sovereignty" is that it splinters communities across the y-axis, which leads to the proliferation of the sites of violence on the ground while simultaneously reiterating the symbolics of the *top*. "Occupation of the skies", writes Mbembe, "acquires a critical importance, since most of the policing is done from the air" (30–34). How precise this definition will become is evident today in what were formerly known as Syria and Iraq.

Do-it-yourself war

If the situation and circumstances in which you have found yourself appear to be too critical, do not despair; in the position, where everything seems to threaten you, there is nothing to be afraid of; when we are surrounded by all the dangers, there is no need to be frightened of any of it; when there seems to be no way out, one has to count on all of the solutions; when we are surprised, we have to surprise the enemy. (Sun Tzu)

In his writings, Marko Peljhan often refers to the paradoxical lack of information about what is affecting local events in the era of the overabundance of information. In his theatre programme text of 1993, "In Search for a New Condition", Peljhan says that people, as individuals, "have less and less influence over social situations to which they become hostages."⁷ The reality that is reterritorialised through the media was previously deterritorialised (broken down into information) and transmitted to people via the channels and filters that are ultimately invisible to them. In this context, experiencing bodies lack the information needed to read, orient and protect themselves in their most immediate environments. When the wars in Yugoslavia started in 1991, Peljhan remarked:

⁷ The text was distributed as a leaflet at the première of the *RSS ATOL* performance at Moderna Galerija (Museum of Modern Art), Ljubljana.

One of the first visible and tangible consequences [of the Yugoslav war] was that the skies went silent. Air traffic in one of the more congested air corridors in Europe stopped. No contrails were visible for months, and when they reappeared, they were a consequence of military, UN or other war related traffic. Air traffic control communications all but ceased. But one particular landscape that accelerated in the other direction almost to full saturation was the rest of the electromagnetic spectrum. ("Territory 1995–09")

As a reader of magazines such as *Aviation & Technology Weekly* and similar literature, Peljhan at one point in the early 1990s noticed that these magazines were full of ads offering new military technology to an abstract audience and set of invisible consumers. He contacted several companies and asked them to send him quotations or offers for various pieces of what at that time was state-of-the-art military technology. This included advanced antennae designs, GPS/GNSS receivers, inertial measurement units, rugged portable computers, new composite materials, flight automation systems, combat simulation systems, embedded high power computers, noise generators for jammers, as well as high-end, military-grade interception equipment. Within a few weeks his mailbox in Ljubljana was too small for the thick envelopes that he started receiving. His conclusion was that in the post-1989 world, anybody with material means could have access to advanced aerospace and defence-related hardware; through the free global market, anyone could participate in the new global warfare paradigms. For Peljhan, these materials became valuable resources from which he would derive ideas for several projects leading to *Makrolab* in 1997.

Peljhan's pre-Makrolab series of projects, called *Resolutions*, was undertaken as research in tactical solutions for the acute problems emerging in different social contexts of the contemporary world through the use of art and its distribution system as a territory where ideas and solutions can be presented and shared with audiences. The 1996 project *Terminal* was thus conceived as a rhythmically changing display of navigation charts above territories of conflict, supported by real-time audio of communications between the pilots and flight controllers of the Flight Information Regions in the vicinity of Slovenia. These communications were intercepted with VHF and UHF automated radio equipment, which also recorded various military and relief flights over Slovenia and Croatia towards the south-east after the war in Bosnia. *Southern Communicator* was a similar project, adapted to skies over Africa and presented at the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. The project was later advanced in a rendition called *Sky Area* to which a real-time view of flight paths and positions was added with the help of the radar and positioning information provided in real time by the Deutsche Flugsicherung, the German flight control organisation. The project was presented for the first time in 1999 in the *Lehmbrueck* museum in Duisburg, Germany. Other projects from this series are *UCOG-144* (1996), *Sundown* (1998) and *Trust – System 15* (1999). All of these works apply highly specialised defence and military

technologies and redirect their use in the contexts of art and what has since become known as “tactical media”.

Before GPS and other navigation systems became ubiquitous, Peljhan and his collaborators utilised a self-built GPS/GLONASS receiver, coupled with a self-contained ad hoc VHF digital packet radio network, giving them the ability to take geo-located digital pictures and sounds and to present a moving map display on the Internet in real time.⁸ The ideological twist of *UCOG-144* was that it combined the American GPS system (Global Positioning System) and Soviet-Russian navigation system GLONASS (Globalnaja Navigacionaja Spuntnikovaja Sistema) to create a neo-Situationist work that supported the user’s psychogeographic exploration of the city in real time, with annotations and an archival memory of the user’s *dérive* through the city. Today, the mechanics of *UCOG-144* is found in almost every smartphone, but it lived for a time on the Internet in 1996 in the context of art.

Acute technological anticipation was also noticeable in *Trust-System 15*, a project that Peljhan created three years later and presented as part of PS1’s *Generation Z* show in New York City. This was the beginning of his exploration of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV or drone) technology, which went through various renditions and applications in the following years and remains one of his main conceptual and professional preoccupations. *Sundown*, created for *Manifesta 2* in Luxembourg in 1998, was conceived differently and featured exact plans and revelations of a fictive cyber-information and military attack on Luxembourg and its institutions. Luxembourg was chosen as a target since it is a micro-state within Europe and the E.U. and is at the centre of its financial markets, sophisticated tax minimisation plans and plans for mining on asteroids, among other similar activities. The project was presented in the Luxembourg historical museum so that it could merge seamlessly with the other historical displays. The fictive attack that the project described with precision tactical maps, plans and intelligence photography (taken by Peljhan on a two-day drive through the state, taking pictures of critical infrastructure and all military and NATO installations) would come from a para-military organisation based in a former Soviet air base located in Crimea. It was to be realised by an arsenal that included Soviet cruise missiles and strategic bombers that were available on the weapons black market in those years. The installation included precise plans of attack, air tasking orders, the weapons to be used, and photographs of strategic objects. The targets of the attack included the interior of some of the Luxembourg based European Union institutions that Peljhan and his collaborators had “penetrated” with alias IDs, along with the information about cyber-attack plans on the SWIFT interbank network.⁹

⁸ It is interesting to note that this kind of flight information system later became the network norm, with services such as FlightRadar24, Flightaware and many others.

⁹ *Resolution* projects were usually created as collaborations within a group called PACT SYSTEMS, which includes Peljhan, hacker and engineer Borja Jelic and programmer Luka Frelih. The SWIFT cyber-attack plans were eerily similar to the ones

The project was complex in its rendition, realistic in its display and it went almost completely unnoticed at the *Manifesta 2* biennial, melting into the historical museum displays and functioning as another testament to the stealth nature of this kind of aesthetics.

Makrolab - double faktura

[It] appears on the horizon and walks slowly forth. On it the sailors of Lodomir work the spinnaker of thought. Large sails propel it forward, a complex mechanism allows its legs to lift and twist. There are no metal noises. The materials are new and unknown. It does have legs and it looks like an insect. It has the functionality and energy balance of a bee and the armor of an Armageddon cockroach. (Peljhan, "krk – first makrolab concept text")

Makrolab is a contemporary avant-garde work in that it interrogates the history of avant-garde problems and vocabularies with the advanced technologies and the experiences of war. It was first planned as one of four projects in a series titled *Lodomir-Faktura* (often referred to as *Surfaces*) that was created between 1994 and 1997. The name of the series refers to the concept of *faktura* that was developed by Russian avant-garde artists and linguists. *Faktura* stands for the principle of the reduction of material objects into abstracted forms – surfaces – as well as for the inscription of the seemingly immaterial qualities of language, feelings and thoughts into the visible and tangible surfaces that mediate revolutionary consciousness. *Faktura* pertains to the materiality of objects and language as well as to how these reflect and change in accordance with technological development and the rules of material production in a given era. It also implies the material qualities of seemingly abstract entities, a feature of *faktura* that is at the centre of Peljhan's explorations in this period.

The *Surfaces* series included a computer-animated film (*Mikrolab – First Surface*), a performative event (*We were expecting you! – Second Surface*), a mobile architecture project (*Makrolab – Third Surface*) and a performance piece (*Lodomir-Faktura – Fourth Surface – The surface of contact!*). The series was inspired by historic avant-garde precedents, from Oskar Schlemmer's mechanical choreography to Wassily Kandinsky's abstract painting, László Moholy-Nagy's techno-centric stages and the linguistic experiments of Velimir Khlebnikov. *Mikrolab – First Surface* (1994) is a real-time computer animation and film that was based on the exploration of Mussorgsky and Kandinsky's 1928 *Bilder einer Ausstellung* (Pictures at the Exhibition).¹⁰ The element of real-timeness was central to Peljhan's interest in the work and this is why he opted

that were actually executed in February 2016 by unknown hackers who attempted to steal \$951 million and ended up stealing \$81 million from the Bangladesh Central Bank account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

10 Peljhan collaborated on this real-time film with programmers Alfred Anžlovar and Luka Frelih, working in Open GL and using the Silicon Graphics Crimson Reality Engine II workstation.

to use the most advanced computer accessible to him at the time, since the concept of real time implies a construction of reality and not a composed process. As such, it opens up a critical dimension of his interests in contemporary cybernetic processes. The second work of the series was a performance event, again in real time, in which Peljhan connected himself to live weather satellite imagery of the Meteosat satellite that used an interface and electrodes to stimulate micro muscle movements in his body. The performance was undertaken by Peljhan while he was asleep for 12 hours in front of an audience in a specially designed bed.¹¹ The last work in the series, the performance *Fourth Surface*, staged Khlebnikov's poem *Ladimir*, a complex verbal work full of metaphors, metonymies and dreamlike visions. Its title designates the universal land of the future. The features of the visual display of the performance included: defence industry images and slogans that were drawn directly from material that Peljhan had collected through his research; live and recorded satellite feeds, mostly centred around the end of the conflict in Bosnia; and a matrix display used to show textual messages and instructions for the public.

The original plan of *Surfaces* was to highlight *Fourth Surface* as the most complex and synthesising work of the series. *Makrolab* was initially planned as a less ambitious experiment exploring the possibilities of mobile stage architecture. *Makrolab – Third Surface* was meant to work in tandem with *Mikrolab – First Surface* and was an experiment in search of a new form of theatre suspended between the virtuality of the moving image and the corporeality of architecture. The series explored the possibility of finding a new *faktura* of theatre. The shift of focus into what evolved into *Makrolab* took place on the remote island of Krk on the northern Croatian coast and is closely associated with the experience of the Yugoslav war. Peljhan describes the moment when his group roamed around the island in search of an appropriate natural setting to stage the *Makrolab* mobile stage prototype and arrived at a sign marking the entrance to the territory called The Moon, near the town of Baška. They stayed there and continued talking about the art of the unfolding new era and noticed two things that shaped the future of Peljhan's work: a clear blue sky punctuated by twin contrails of what was clearly a military jet sortie and thunder-like sounds coming from very far away, later identified as artillery explosions coming from the front line, which was less than 20 nautical miles away. From that specific isolated context *Makrolab* emerged as a vision of a nomadic war machine that integrates the idea of avant-garde art with the twisted spatial-temporal algorithms of contemporary warfare.

Makrolab consciously embraces its own contradictions by creating a kind of double reverse of Schlemmer's *Schaubühne* and thus presents a previously unseen solution

¹¹The work was presented only once as part of the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival (The Incident Symposium), curated by Rob La Frenais in the summer of 1995. The bed design was conceptualised and realised together with the architect Jurij Krpan.

to an old avant-garde problem.¹² Schlemmer's perfect engineer gazes into a calculable space (abstract stage) from the incalculable outside, anticipating a situation that, as was said at the beginning of this essay, became the normal mode of existence at the end of the 20th century, in which most of us, consciously or not, became the soldiers in the army of the technocratic-military class. *Makrolab* is equipped with a variety of small "theatre" screens that are attached to the webs that can provide an instant and permanent visual display of that which is recorded and calculated in a world controlled by humanity. The goal of *Makrolab* since its first iteration in Kassel, Germany, was to use this machinery for the research of three dynamic fields that are, according to Peljhan, ultimately incalculable and non-representable in their totality: "You cannot build exact mathematical models" for weather and climate changes, migrations (can be migrations of people, animals, money, matter) and telecommunications" ("Lecture 197"). The cybernetic complexity of the three "zones of interest" of *Makrolab* has been completely exposed through the contemporary Internet networks that melt most of the world's communications into a global grid, with their search algorithms, databases and "clouds", as well as the increasingly potent financial transaction, weather and climate models – all of these interconnected on several levels.

During its 10 years of drifting around the globe, *Makrolab* produced multiple recorded and unrecorded experiences, observations and results. Fraser MacDonald, who was a member of the 2002 crew in Scotland, called *Makrolab* a "machine for looking and living" (16); Lisa Parks and Ursula Biemann, who were on the same Scotland mission, thought of it as "an earth-based satellite" (34). Both descriptions point to the reversal of the gaze achieved by the project and the use of its hardware and its software machinery for looking into the unknown and invisible territories that opened up in the era of telecommunications. *Makrolab* offered its participants an opportunity to look at the vastness of the data produced by global communications networks, to explore what can be found there and to produce an understanding that these technologically-produced data flows have become as vast as the oceans and are ultimately inseparable from the broader ecological systems that now coexist and interact in previously unseen and unpredictable ways, generating new creative opportunities as well as opportunities for maltreatment and abuse by groups and nations who control the technical and financial resources of the earth and oversee political and military decisions. This complex situation was the 21st-century feast for eyes that kept the perfect engineers of *Makrolab* looking.

The remaining question is what kind of artwork is *Makrolab* and what does it contribute to the definition of an avant-garde artwork in our era? *Makrolab* represents an advanced example of the art self-metaprogram established in the late-20th century and can be best explained in terms of what Jack Burnham long ago called "system

¹² According to Peter Bürger, contradiction is what keeps alive the idea of avant-garde "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde".

aesthetics". Burnham's late-1960s essays, "System Aesthetics" and "Real Time Systems", are yet unsurpassed as a theoretical and critical framework for understanding avant-garde questions and problems today. Only Burnham examined the avant-garde art events of his time from the standpoint of emerging social and technological conditions and the accompanying challenges and not from the standpoint of the norms of aesthetic discourse. For our time, he contended,

the emerging major paradigm in art is neither an *ism* nor a collection of styles. Rather than a novel way of rearranging surfaces and spaces, it is fundamentally concerned with the implementation of an art impulse in an advanced technological society. As a culture producer, man has traditionally claimed the title, *Homo Faber*: man the maker (of tools and images). With continued advances in the industrial revolution, he assumes a new and more critical function. As *Homo Arbiter formae* his prime role becomes that of a *man the maker of esthetic decisions*. These decisions, whether they are made concretely or not, control the quality of life on the Earth. Moreover, these are value judgments that dictate the direction of technological endeavor. Quite plainly such a vision extends beyond the political realities of the present. (25)

The art self-metaprogram of the 1960s and 1970s emphasises a substantial contradiction with regard to the historical avant-garde's utopian claims to unite art and life beyond the institution of art in that it fully acknowledged that life is already aestheticised, fictionalised and militarised. For this reason, the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s sought to performatively enact those instances (undetected overseers) that produce social algorithms according to which the aestheticisation, fictionalisation and militarisation of society is performed. Allan Kaprow, for example, in the role of systems analyst or systems designer, meticulously scripted his happenings, which were supposed to function as semi-spontaneous participatory events. In his writings, Kaprow made it clear that once the spectator entered the sphere of the happening, he or she became objectified in that situation and exposed to consumption as the physical, emotional, verbal, social (and so on) material of an artwork that is simultaneously lived and observed. One could simply enjoy the unique experience of the happening or view it as an extended canvas capturing forms of human sociability – or preferably both. For that kind of double perception, claimed Kaprow, one needs to develop an acrobatic capacity to constantly shift between the identification and participation that generates the artwork as experience and the objective existence of what is generated and created, "allowing them to entangle and assault us" (*Essays* 5). I term this capacity of perception a double *faktura* of the avant-garde artwork, structured in a way that compresses art and life.

Makrolab is a double *faktura* whose mission is, if all goes well and only under specific and always singular circumstances, to generate a qualitative jump in perception

from life as art (artificially created life of technocratic society) to art as life (lived experience designed by art impulse and based on aesthetic decisions) and thus fulfils the goal inscribed in the idea of the avant-garde. As Eshun put it in his report from *Makrolab's* Scottish mission, the project was based on twin imperatives: the overt imperative was “the duty of the crew to research and develop specific projects during their stay on *Makrolab*” (projects based on their individual research and interests); the more covert imperative was “the will of the crew to generate a specific group consciousness during their two week stint in the lab” (6). *Makrolab*, as Eshun perceptively contended, offered the participant “the chance to become the experiment. To become the guinea pig. To experiment on self as she or he adapts to the interpersonal dynamic of microcommunal life” (6). It also offered the participant the chance to collectively look at electromagnetic data oceans and signal territories, to discuss what they saw and in the process to engage in the production of a subjectivity that, as another visitor of the lab observed, would not be possible within the patterns of daily urban life conditioned by the “data debris that are as hard to ignore as to perceive” (Staun, “*Makrolab*”). The question of “isolation and insulation”, *Makrolab's* first imperative, was a precondition for the success of the project as it created a distance from the habitual reflexes towards data and other exposures in urban settings and opened up a possibility for *Makrolab's* second, or twin imperative, that which Peljhan termed “systemic awareness”. Peljhan offers the best description of the limits and possibilities of *Makrolab's* inquiries:

When you board a plane and fly over the ocean you are part of a very vast system of communications, migrations, economics, capital exchange, and so on. Yes it is you that is travelling, but you are part of as system and you accept the rules of that system and it's good that you understand that. I don't say that we should understand everything that we do, but definitely it's good to build this awareness. Because with the build-up of awareness, the mystification fades away. And maybe the gratification of the sublime can be achieved. (qtd. in Eshun 10)

Equipped with satellite dishes that enable access to the Internet and receive more than 600 TV channels, electromagnetic frequencies and interstellar noise, *Makrolab* not only interfered with the zones of communication that are supervised by the State apparatus but also mimicked an apparatus that looks like one of the State apparatus' own scientific or military subdivisions and permeates the techno beast with, as Burnham would have it, “art impulse” and “esthetic decisions”. This makes *Makrolab* a genuine war machine in the D&G sense in that it does not wage territorial wars but accepts the war and the right to defend oneself if attacked by the means of one's choice. As an avant-garde artwork, *Makrolab* acknowledges humanity's most definite and most ambiguous frontier.

That said, *Makrolab* is a war machine and also a “walking stage” that replays the history

of the avant-garde stage. If we watch *Makrolab* as theatre, all we see are other people looking. What, in the final analysis, does it mean that we can see ourselves seeing?

Postscript

In one of our conversations, Marko Peljhan described *Makrolab* as a reflection machine, the eye and ear of the world, enabling the participant and visitor to engage in the processes of the materialisation of immaterial – that is, the machinic production of knowledge. The project nominally paused in 2007 after its first 10 years of operations. However, the Antarctic plans for *Makrolab* and its Lodomir station are still alive and Peljhan's own work and the work of his collaborators since then – be it in the zone of sensors, robotics, the links between local and traditional knowledges and scientific approaches to epistemology, as well as remote sensing, software-defined radios and mathematical modelling – clearly form a basis for future machinic and aesthetic endeavours that might surprise us once again with their resilience. After all, the revelations of Edward Snowden, the insights into climate modelling by Paul Edwards, the rise of drone warfare, the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent rise in high-frequency trading, and the new realities in the Middle East, among other phenomena, have confirmed some of the main premises of the research that *Makrolab* was engaged in since 1997. We will be looking and listening.

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