

**MIRKO NIKOLIC - "Games Without Frontiers"**  
**May 25 to June 6, 2009.**

**ZVONO Gallery**  
**Visnjiceva 5, Belgrade**

The colored stripes painted by Mirko Nikolic stretch across the raw-gray canvas discretely, limited by a lazy and capricious will we behold distantly, with a sort of latent, detached sensitivity hi-jacked by their chromatic contrast. As they group in more or less tight, parallel or intertwining bundles, we see them shape complicated grids, overlapping and creating different morphologies. Nikolic's paintings are maps, and those bundles of colored stripes are territories, flowing on spot along invisible vectors, each figure tense towards the closest one.

We look at those territories from afar, from outer space, with the cold omniscience so familiar to us Google Maps users.

Thanks to the internet, we now own more knowledge than we can possibly absorb, and so the web is more and more about interfaces, about the way we're served this cognitive over-abundance and the ways we can filter it. Interfaces become the aesthetics of the latest postmodernity, or maybe they testify an emerging post-postmodernity mashing not only aesthetics, but recombining functionalities as well as looks.

When all information is common, to filter, choose and even discard it is an act of elegance, a semiotic gesture more significant than information in itself. And so the explosion of maps, indexes, graphs and charts all over the internet might be the world wide web's most relevant content right now.

In particular, maps and geo-referenced meta-data are the pulp of the new information aesthetics. With Google Maps, the most famous and invasive of these devices, we're able to leaf through different interpretation layers - map, terrain, satellite, traffic - each one projecting a different aesthetic rendering on the same geographical structure. I could make many other examples (only the most famous of which standing under the Google banner), but whatever its implications - be it for advertising, blogging, or anything else - the geospatial web<sup>1</sup> is proof the digital, once deemed "virtual" internet

sphere is intertwining tighter and tighter with the physical world.

So, the world those maps describe still exists. Urbanization has changed it dramatically in the last decades, covering the globe with ever-expanding cities, where immense slums carve their way onto toxic and precarious land, paying the first tribute to the myth of progress by turning swamps and fields into inhabitable environments. Later they're bought and sold until their price grows enough to push their original dwellers further away from the formal economic core of the megalopolis, where State appeal lies. At the same time, gentrification elevates bits of favelas into urban centers and cultural milieus, reterritorializing economic informalism into legit real estate speculation, or creative ghettos for the international intelligentsia.

Much like Nikolic's paintings and the interface aesthetics I mentioned before, cities now evolve like recombinant organic creatures, their elements assuming different functions depending on need. Through operations of renovation and redevelopment, post-industrial hangars bloom into art venues, historical buildings convert to malls. But although such configurations behave as natural, organic, spontaneous, quasi-physical reactions, every inch of sidewalk leads to a legal owner, to whom its homeless dweller has to pay a tribute<sup>2</sup>. It's the worldwide cartels, consortiums and councils of politicians and corporation CEOs who design these urban interfaces. And us, the people living in the middle, we are no less confused than those buildings have become.

People living in globalized cities - which are the bastard sons of the American suburban sprawl paradigm and the viral savviness of slums - carry layered identities and divide themselves in balkanized, fractalized communities based no more on social status only, but also on cultural consumption. In America, the latino community - due to their disadvantaged osmosis with the United States - deals with a semantic debate regarding their status as foreign workers, being the term "hispanic" considered too demeaning and the hyphenated suffix -Americans too patronizing<sup>3</sup>. These issues originate new ethnicities or meta-ethnicities, depending on generational and cultural factors, but they're also obstacles to a real identification in a common culture.

While cities have also fostered the rise of the creative class and the new economy, war has moved into town as well. As we've seen in

the infamous terrorist attacks of the last decade, from 9/11 to Mumbai, more and more urban environments are turning into battlefields. The Israeli military is teaching their officers french philosophers such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, to have them better understand the contemporary world and apply this newfound knowledge to a deadly use of the urban fabric<sup>4</sup>.

Yet, a semiotic numbness seems to possess the population of western cities, overwhelmed by over-mediatisation, social bookmarking, micro-blogging and hipster-bred irony.

Postmodern art has seen an exponential increase in semiotic combinations, linguistic experiments, baroque attempts at new aesthetics, pop being a universal plague impossible to transcend. In response to this diffused irony many efforts have been made, more or less successful.

One of the most notable is a growing interest for spacial interfaces, verging on architectural practice. This trend has been most evident in this year's 2009 Venice Biennale, where architecture was omnipresent. The works of Yona Friedman, Carsten Höller and Cildo Meireles at the Arsenale, plus those of Liam Gillick, Elmgreen & Dragset, Claude Lévêque and Haegue Yang at the Giardini are some of the many examples I could make. But a physical approach to art/architecture is only one aspect of the Biennale's theme, *Making Worlds*, selected by curator Daniel Birnbaum.

If chaotic or minimalist installations conjugate a 60s-flavored attention for space with varying degrees of political commitment, the project itself, in shape of drawing, has gained much attention.

Utopian visions and realistic proposals had equal exposure at the Biennale, in the works of artists like Pavel Pepperstein, Marjetica Potrč, Gordon Matta-Clark and others. World-making is a practice of the mind and drawings channel concepts and create interfaces just as much as bulky and often frivolous structures do.

Apart the Biennale, another significant tendency in art these days is the late political/minimal art, where minimalism mingles with contemporary issues and abandons its beautiful and mute evidence for a more engaged, experience-textured look and feel. Although this unusual binomial has culminated in an exhibition at Berlin's KunstWerke, curated by its inventor Klaus Biesenbach, a need to hop beyond postmodernism's lazy self-indulgence can be perceived diffusely.

Mirko Nikolic's paintings have a sharp focus and show a comprehensive view, but there's also a material and raw feel to them, an obstinate analog reflex. Yet they're interfaces, they're maps, but they're not projections of any subterranean data lying under their surface. Nikolic's figures are vector representations of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. They're movement, connection, rhizome, a scheme you can stretch on different topics, an image assuming significance only when put at service of something else. Which is maybe as political as art can get.

<sup>1</sup> You can find more info on Wikipedia, but also check out this website:  
<http://www.opengeospatial.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, New York, 2006. Pgg. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, Verso, New York, 2000. Pg. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Read an essay by architect and scholar Eyal Weizman here:  
<http://info.interactivist.net/node/5324>