

Mariotti's ritual artefacts and the origins of media art.

In search of the lost multisensorial characteristics of new media.

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Abstract

This paper will give an overview of the seminal works of Francesco Mariotti, an artist of Swiss origin (Bern, 1943) who has lived between Peru and Switzerland since 1952 and can be regarded as one of the pioneers of media art both in Latin America and Europe; more importantly, his work linked both continents in distinctive dialogues relating social processes, natural phenomena and technology. In 1968, during the 4th Documenta in Kassel he produced one of the first interactive installations in media art history: "Project Geldmacher – Mariotti". A year later, in 1969, during the X Sao Paulo Biennial, he presented "The Circular Movement of Light", a multi-sensorial (light, smell, sound) installation. Through extensive research of the archives of both Documenta and Sao Paulo Biennial, this paper focuses on these two seminal works with emphasis on their main characteristics and explores how these projects are an early example of works on participatory and social processes, natural and multisensorial phenomena, arguing that through the use of technology, these should be regarded as significant works of the history of media art in Latin America.

Keywords

Multisensorial, Documenta, Sao Paulo Biennale, mutisensorial, Mariotti, media art.

Introduction

Francesco Mariotti (Bern, 1943) is an artist of Swiss origin who lives between Peru and Switzerland since 1953 and can be regarded, though relatively unknown in some circles, as one of the pioneers of media art and whose work linked Europe and Latin America through distinctive dialogues relating participatory and social processes, natural and multisensorial phenomena and the use of technology.

The work of Mariotti is extensive and most of it is well documented and available online on the artist's web site*. However, we will concentrate mainly on two of his early significant works which are perhaps his most emblematic and historical ones during those early years.

Francesco Mariotti comes from an old Ticino family but spent his youth in Lima. In 1964, he returned to Europe, attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1965 and then from 1966 to 1968 he studied at the University of Fine Arts of Hamburg (HFBK). During this time, along with his friend Klaus Geldmacher, they worked on experimental installations as well as mixed media shows.

Documenta 4: Project Geldmacher - Mariotti

While still at the university, the young Mariotti, along with Geldmacher, were invited to present a proposal for Documenta 4 in 1968. The proposal comprised of a model and cost estimate for the deployment of a large cube-shaped metallic structure from which 9,000 light bulbs of 22.5 kw, 1,000 fluorescent lamps and several loudspeakers were arranged. This installation generated a "photo-acoustic ambience" where the audience could enter and experience it. Documenta's selection committee voted in favor of the project but it was denied being located at the Federicianum among more established artists such as Robert Rauschenberg or Roy Lichtenstein. Therein, Mariotti and Geldmacher's project work was to be installed at the Orangerie, where most of the sculptures were located, next to another remarkable project presented at Documenta 4 by Christo: a white large packed air structure (an "inflatable sausage"). Both Christo's and Geldmacher – Mariotti's projects were ready weeks after the opening of Documenta 4. In those weeks, Christo and Mariotti developed an enduring friendship which influenced the young Mariotti to understand the importance of art, not for its aesthetic or technical value, but as a host for discussing and thinking about society.

The Project Geldmacher - Mariotti was based on a manifesto in which they stated, among other things that in an art exhibition as Documenta 4, financed to a considerable extent with government grants, art appears equitable when it is reinforced as an information carrier not only for a minority but for the larger audience. In this way, art's function must illustrate facts and arguments in favor of social change. The main objective of their project was to question the usual superficial beautification of art and to use art products as a communication medium towards a critical analysis of its use in society.

* <http://www.mariotti.ch/> (accessed 17/03/2017).

The Project Geldmacher – Mariotti’s light and sound effects became one of the landmarks of Documenta 4. It attracted many curious people who participated in the immersive sensorial concert. Inside the cube, a large fan was placed to produce a profound and radical sensation. As it was mentioned in their manifesto, Geldmacher and Mariotti hoped that these structures, based on thousands of electric light bulbs was going to be able to generate a flow of relevant discussions. From the documentations of that time, there were several cultural activities organized around the installation, so it was used not only as a piece of aesthetic pleasure, but also as stage for discussions on topics such as sexuality, war, philosophy or politics as well as a space for spontaneous live performance and electro acoustic music. Even during daytime, the zinc plated installation covered by large plates of Makrolon plastic plates, was seen as a beautiful architectonic piece drawing a lot of attention from the visiting audience to Documenta.

The Documenta 4 experience was somewhat shocking for Mariotti: he felt that most artists, curators and writers that took part of Documenta were part of a system which evolved into a superficial spectacle of society, instead of using art to bring social, political and ecological change. However, in Documenta he met Rinaldo Bianda who at that time had a gallery in Lugano, named Flaviana mostly dedicated to printed and experimental media. Mariotti started to work with Bianda on artefacts in which the flow of electricity transformed sound into electrical impulses. It was an uncanny system of cables. They both were interested in producing artefacts that through their aesthetic and technical properties could also stimulate more thoughtful discussions, ideas and knowledge sharing. Later, Bianda, would become the founder of the well-known Video Art Festival of Locarno.

X Sao Paulo Biennale: The Circular Movement of Light

After the successful and impressive installation made for Documenta 4 and while collaborating with Bianda, Mariotti, at that time only 26 years old, was invited by the Swiss Federal Art Commission to represent Switzerland at the X Sao Paulo Biennale, along with three other Swiss artists (Camille Graeser, Willy Weber and Herbert Distel).

At the time, Mariotti was just starting to get involved with Eastern religions; in particular, the study of the Indian philosophical religious text, the “Bhagavad-Gita” (which could be loosely translated as the “Song of the Lord”) in which the Lord Krishna answers fundamental questions about life posed to him by Arjuna at the helm of going to war in the Mahabharata. Experiments in the field of aesthetics interested Mariotti, only to the extent that they were conducive to a more profound meditation which could gather a group of like-minded people. A new project for a kinetic sculpture increasingly took the form of a sort of Hindu temple for the “circular movement of light”.

Mariotti chose a penta-dodecahedron with sharpened pentagonal faces for the sphere-shaped temple. The twelve pentagons were in turn composed of five triangles, which in turn were each made up of four triangles and resulted in a structure with a total of 240 triangular faces. The interior of the structure was determined by a central multi-beam light cone with a flame tip. Four electronic systems made the penetrable structure, reminiscent of a crystal-kinetic object.

Beyond the infrastructural and technical complexity of the work, its aim was to comprise a deep multisensorial experience for the visitors. The idea of the work was that within one-hour one could experience a 24-hour day cycle through continuous changes of light, color, scents, temperature, and sound frequencies. It was meant to be not an individual experience but a participatory one, which also generated a very different perception from the individualistic western practice of art we are used to.

For Mariotti, existing knowledge tools were extremely limited to perceive and understand the rich and deep complexity of the world. Western cultural forms of perception of senses were quite limited and many of the canons we had established for each sense act as opposed to the others (Ong 1991, Howes, D. et al. 2014). Thus, Mariotti thought that only by observation and straining all his or her senses will the visitor be able to perceive the continuous change of all these optical, acoustic, olfactory, and thermal effects. Mariotti deemed necessary a relaxed-tensed stay of at least thirty minutes for the audience in his installation, to truly experience the “floating alone in the infinite,” that he seeks with this meditation room. He himself claimed: “Upon each assembly of the temple of light I recognize new messages. The sculpture increasingly strikes me as a spaceship. A spaceship from the astral world.” [...] “I must also say that this astral ship has a therapeutic effect on the visitors. The sound frequencies massage the back-bone from bottom to top up to the brain” (Rotzer 1972).

But what was more surprising at that time, and even for today’s standards, was the installation’s complex setup in which several technical and mechanical components orchestrated an intermingling production of different senses that acted together in unison resulting in a rather holistic experience. The acoustic changes were produced by two tone generators with 36 sound-light channels and two variable sound frequencies oscillators ranging from 10 Hz to 10 kHz can be heard in the interior of the light object over the course of an hour. In some determined frequencies, the sound of water was amplified and at some moment it was heard very loudly. The light program was emitted by the central cone from under the glass floor daily in an hourly cycle with its subtly changing color spectrum, including infrared and ultraviolet rays. During the day, the color program was determined by the natural change in the direction of arrival and the incident angle of the Sun. The olfactory program and the AC-regulated temperature, were modified

by the sound state and ranged from ozone to pine, eucalyptus, mint, violets, lavender, caramel syrup and incense –it was based on the sound frequencies to generate thresholds from cold odors to hotter ones–. The idea was to simulate a very special and radical atmosphere.

As it was the case in Documenta 4, Mariotti's installation for the X Sao Paulo Biennale was also highly commented and appraised by the media. The press at that time mentioned the striking size and complexity of the work: "a structure of 7 meters high and 5 meters width, which symbolized a temple dedicated to oration". Even for Brazilian standards, the press was quite surprised about the size and logistics required to bring up such complex work which comprised of 29 boxes (Lux Journal 1969a). Additionally, in contrast to "Project Geldmacher – Mariotti" which was situated quite far from Documenta's main building (the Federicianum), the "Circular Movement of Light" was located inside the Biennale building, just right of the main entrance, making it not only noticeable by every single visitor but also becoming one of the most iconic pieces, and thus gathering a significant amount of press.

Coincidentally, a special focus on art and technology was prompted by three exhibitions to be organized during the Biennale. One was by the Smithsonian Institution and MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies (led by Gyorgy Kepes) on the existing relations between art and technology that was celebrated significantly in the news (UPI 1969). The second one, organized by French critic Pierre Restany, titled "Art & Technologie" included works of Raysse, Le Parc, Kowalksi, Kosice and Quentin. Lastly, England was due to participate with an exhibition titled "Cybernetic Serendipity". However, none of those exhibitions, along with many others, ever happened as an international boycott gained momentum against the exhibition due to the evidence of cultural repression in Brazil, governed at that time by a military junta, though some of those countries did participate with other representatives (Lux Journal 1969b).

Such a significant turmoil and the lack of shows related to art and technology also contributed to increase in an interest towards the work of Mariotti, mentioned in some news as the "Swiss attraction" which emphasized its "translucent plastic with lights in movement and mutation". Mariotti's "sculpture and Hindu temple" was also mentioned to be "opposed to the creation of serialized art" by proposing a "Krishna Temple, a place for religious contemplation, dedicated to the Hindu god", he added "after the opening I want to organize a sort of spiritual symposium inside the temple, with all artists" (Almeida 1969).

It is understood that a work such as "The circular movement of light" cannot be measured or classified within aesthetic or formal standards as it wanted to address the visitor in an entirely different way than a work of art usually was able to do. Mariotti's piece wanted to be nothing less than

a kind of total work of art with an emphasized sacred character, an instrument, an impetus for meditation and introspection.

After it was exhibited during the Sao Paulo Biennale for six months, it was partially rebuilt again in June 1970 for the Art 70 Fair in Basel and then in November 1971 it went to Lima, where it was made into a gift by the Swiss government to the Peruvian State as part of the Pacific Ocean International Trade Fair, considered one of the most popular events visited in Lima at that time. Families from different ethnical backgrounds who migrated to Lima may have perceived a completely different experience from the most artistic western-centric one at Sao Paulo or Basel. Interestingly for local passersby in Lima, the luminescent Hindu temple might have been a closer reminiscent of a mystic space within the Andean cosmovisions, traditions and myths.

The art system is still mostly controlled by the visual sense. Mariotti's seminal works questioned the status quo of art as a purely visual form by introducing a more holistic form of beauty, one that is maintained through the collective practice of rituals in which the audience congregates in a profound and spiritual multisensorial experience that integrates, invigorates and restores the balance and order in our soul.

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