In the Midst of Burned Black and Red

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An essay on Jarkko Räsänen's exhibition New and newest age II (Finnish: Uusi ja uusin aika II)

"The old monetary mole is the animal of the space of enclosure, but the serpent is that of the societies of control. We have passed from one animal to the other, from the mole to the serpent, in the system under which we live, but also in our manner of living and in our relations with others. The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network. Everywhere surfing has already replaced the older sports."

(Gilles Deleuze: Postscript on the Societies of Control)

New and newest age II refers to the two periods of Europe's political history. The new age starts somewhere midst the turn of the 16th century. Its launch is affiliated by the beginning of the age of discovery through the contribution of the first voyage of Columbus and the reformation of the church. The new age is branded by the evolution of thought that paved the way towards a modern society. The newest age on the other hand is the period from the French revolution up until the end of the 20th century. It features the struggle for self-governance for peoples, societies, sexes and ethnicities and the bloody wars that at times ensued from these struggles. Both of these ages are stigmatized by genocides of indigenous peoples, wars between nations and the transatlantic slave trade in addition to democratic progress.

The premise for Räsänen's digital photography ensemble "New and newest age II" is the work published in 1929, a Finnish language history book which unknown students have upgraded by sticking comic book character faces to cover the features of pictured historic figures. Räsänen has extended this process by digitally scanning and burning the pictures red on canvas using a jpeg algorithm. In this sense burning means compressing an image to its utmost limit. Result being the thing which is qualified by the Digitalocene to be worth seeing.

A film based image and moving picture with its exposure and montages is connected to the fossil fueled machine or apparatus and its parts. The adepts of the 1920s montage movement (Eisenstein, Pudovkin) are proof of how much the merging of images and its consequences was pondered. The films of the latter part of the 20th century took these methods to the extreme by piercing the oil and selluloid based film. The idea was not only to utilize the image itself but its foundation, the molecular processes on the surface the image was printed on.

Unlike the image based on oil based celluloid and solar power, the digital image is based on existentialism powered by paremeters, Schrödinger-esque "to be or not to be". It either exists or it doesn't exist. A damaged file cannot be seen. With the algorithms of his own design Räsänen can make the process work to achieve his aims. His method can be looked at as a deeply rigorous deconstruction of ordering and compressing of coded material. "The method of burning" takes the image to its logical final, a form reminiscent of a branding.

In the same way as the Japanese composer and media artist Ryoji Ikeda, Räsänen makes the building and functionality principles of the data influencing us visible with a systematic discipline. In a sense it is a resolution to a technological sublime. Stockhausen deconstructed the logic of the string quartet in his helicopter-piece (musician usually playing mellow and intimate music deprived from hearing one another by placing them in separate helicopters). Räsänen deconstructs a self-explanatory image into information columns in his video that endlessly re-construct the smallest of building blocks. The takeover of technology doesn't need huge technological machinery any longer. As we know from nano- and biotechnology, instead of a telescope the microscopic view on things can alter things in an ever increasing way. The key here would probably be code and the opportunity for systemic aesthetic.

The material re-arrangement of the video in Räsänen's exhibition is implemented with paremeters witch aid the formed information to change in the ways enabled by the medium. Räsänen compares his works to methods used in the 1990s that utilize the discoveries of algorithmic art and electronic music. According to Räsänen the closest to his method comes the spectral music of the 1970s. In spectral music the micro structure of sound was analyzed using acoustic measuring tools and computers. The found "note pillar" was written down to be played by a living synthesizer, an orchestra.

In 1959 British scientist and author C.P. Snow wrote his book on two cultures and the scientific revolution. According to Snow the solving of the world's problems constantly fails because humanistic and scientific culture are separated into their own areas. A "Third culture" is the one where artists and scientists can meet. Finnish Erkki Kurenniemi has not only exceeded the gorge separating these areas but has also influenced the

underground scene. It is characteristic of underground culture that by standing up against the mainstream, it didn't ostracize the "overground" which is culture in its broadest and most everyday form: The systems that control the everyday thoughts of human society with both visible and invisible means.

Having background in the Finnish Demo-scene with endless curiosity towards the web, with recorded material all across his youth, all the way up to living in the surrounding area of the hipster-listed Vaasankatu and interest towards folklore and ancient etymology of words, all define Räsänen's character. The amount of apparently disconnected interests but the precise return to the immaterial that emulates material form that surrounds us outside the web and create new experiences and the user interface of reality.

Gilles Deleuze's "Societies of Control" meant the next phase in a society based on discipline, where control is not only external but extends to the smallest details of our private lives. The pondering can be continued to this day. Everyday occurrences can lead in handing over the most intimate of details of our lives to global enterprises. Facebook is a treasure chest of future micro historians. A sort of a 21st century inquisition diary.

In the images Räsänen has "burnt", the original grid can be seen as a geometric continuum but the color tones have diminished. All that is left is "the information deemed worth seeing by the western digital society". The pictures printed on fabric paper resemble as if they were branded and the associations from them penetrate the subliminal of visual arts in the 20th century raising forth forgotten embodiments of madness. Perhaps the most crushing of these is the incorporation of the comic book character "Jeff" (from "Mutt and Jeff"), one of the humorous characters in mass culture that have lost their sense and consideration with capitalist phenomena, to the portrait of the Pope Innocent X.

In the history of newspaper funnies, "Mutt and Jeff" by American cartoonist Bud Fisher, are one of the longest running and oldest cartoon characters; Mutt is the gambling-addicted homemaker dad and Jeff is Mutt's friend on the run from the insane asylum, whose imaginative and megalomanic schemes the two characters try to accomplish with feeble success. Wincapita and Sunny Car Center, anyone?

By placing Jeff's open mouthed head on the reproduction of the portrait of Pope Innocent X (1650) from the book New and newest age, Räsänen creates a staggering connection between society's unrest revealed with subtle humor and the re-interpretation of the same image. The screaming colorful stripes in the portrait study by Francis Bacon in his "Study after Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X (1953) distantly resembles the deconstructing algorithmic methods Räsänen incorporates in his video piece. With Bacon the idea is

breaking of the strongly official surface and revealing the uncomfortable instability. The material and existentialist plane is elicited behind the portrait of a person who wished his name should depict purity as the representative of spiritual power.

Räsänen's exhibition New and Newest age II can be characterized by the word kainós. Read correctly! It is not about modesty (Finnish: kainous) but refers to the Greek language word that differs extensively of the word meaning new (néos) of the same language. Through the intermediary word néos means that a new instance of the world or humankind in its scene, but kainós refers to qualitative change. Where contemporary art is used to néos, kainós brings forth new qualities. In a way the new always appears in a modest manner. It doesn't give everything away at once. It can easily be reproduced, recycle and put into use. This does not happen with Räsänen's images. Not at least right away. That is why they bother the mind in a large extent.

The mentioned term kainós acts also as an etymological base for the geology-term -cene, which has been discussed a lot about (sic!) in recent times: Antropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulhucene (Donna Haraway). We could perhaps talk about Digitalocene. In this instance we're talking about a period in time where old gods have been replaced by new ones. Cenes appear to differ from one another but especially in relation to cultural phenomena, they might overlap. This is when their subliminal becomes an extremely interesting subject for research. My conclusion might be that Räsänen could be said to be looking for the subliminal of the Digitalocene in his art. A bolder statement could be that this limit defines extensively our culture that is aware of its limited resources. The images show the point where its destruction cannot go any further. The point where you can't go any further. What does it say about our time and our own picture in it, when this point puts us faced with historical figures with cartoonish heads, charred black shadows and burning red, bloody faces?

Translators note:

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