

Interview with GUP Magazine, Amsterdam, September 2011

Simone Gork: To begin with, how did you get interested in photography?

Michael Najjar: I started to get interested in photography when I was 14, I got my first camera - a Canon AE-1 - at this time. I was fascinated by this machine and I loved the idea to create little scenarios just for the camera. With 19 I travelled several months to Brazil and learned how to use the camera to capture a documentary. But the real professional dedication to this medium began when I started my studies of new media art in the late 80s in Berlin.

SG: Which photographers influenced you and what kind of photographic landscape did you think you were entering when you started as a practitioner?

MN: My work was more influenced by the ideas and visions of media philosophers like Vilém Flusser, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio. But there are photographers like Hiroshi Sugimoto or Jeff Wall who always had an impact on my work because of their conceptual approach to the medium. When I started my career the photographic landscape was turning from analogue to digital, that was extremely exciting. Totally new things became suddenly possible with photography and computer image processing. It was obvious to me that there was a paradigmatic shift ahead, we were entering a hybrid world of image creation.

SG: You coined the term ‘hybrid photography’. Can you elaborate on your understanding of that term? How do you perceive your practice and your task as an artist?

MN: ‘Hybrid photography’ means a mixture between analogue and digital elements in a photograph. In 1997 I did a body of work called ‘¡Viva Fidel! – Journey into Absurdity’, about social and political aspects of life in Cuba, which got people very upset. It was actually the starting point of my career. The photo report, in black and white, was published in 1997 in the German newspaper ‘taz’ but without mentioning the fact that I had digitally altered some of the pictures. People were shocked. They sent dozens of letters to the editor saying: What’s going on here? It was a very early time to show that photography was going to the next level, to digital photography. People still felt the need to believe that photography related to what exists in reality. For me, the reactions were a revelation. I realized that I had hit a nerve. It gave me the idea to question the medium more and more, to bring it to a new level, which I called ‘hybrid photography’. Soon after the publication, I got an invitation for my first museum show in Hamburg.

SG: What would you define as the central theme in your work?

MN: As an artist, the central theme of my artwork is the ‘telematic society’. I deal with the key components of a society driven and controlled by computer and information technology. I create visions and utopias of future social structures emerging under the impact of new technologies. Linkage of realistic elements with fictive reality and fictions are the recurrent hallmarks of my art and video works, which are composed in thematically focused series. Simulation and hyperreality are

the foundations underpinning my art. In the digital montage, disparate analogue, digital and computer-generated visual elements fuse to create a new form of imagery.

SG: Your work shows numerous influences coming from the realm of art history, philosophy, science and politics. Where does the first impulse to work on a new project usually come from and how do you decide to pursue it?

MN: The common thread of all my work is the idea of how new technologies will affect our society in the future. When I have decided for a new topic, I start to do scientific art historical and media philosophical research. From this base I start to create a theoretical concept, which leads to practical ideas of visualisation. This has to be related to art history of course, if you don't know the past you can't create the future. The very last step is the photographic execution and the digital postproduction. There is usually little spontaneity in this process because it's very tightened to the concept that was elaborated before.

SG: You often deal with future scenarios that illustrate a new evolution of mankind, stemming from neurobiology – technological implants and cloning - that result in an individualized, self- determined process of evolution. Is that something you'd embrace or fear?

MN: Our lives along our environments have changed so dramatically in the past 2 decades due to the rise of new technologies. In contrast to this, the development of the human body has not changed since the last 40.000 years. It's time to adapt the body and the brain to the new world, driven and controlled by computers and information flows. I rather embrace the possibilities of enhancing the human body with technology, but there a lot of ethic and fundamental questions to be considered. It's a non-stoppable process; we have to face it and to reflect on the consequences.

SG: Let's assume we manage to evolve in this manner and intelligence piles on intelligence, leading to an extreme acceleration of human evolution. Where could we end up?

MN: We will end up in a state that American futurist Ray Kurzweil calls 'the singularity'; the rise of super intelligent life, created through the improvement of human tools by the acceleration of technological progress, reaching the point of infinity. The problem might be that there will be no earth habitat any more for this species, because we will have destroyed our planet before. Mankind might have to exile into space.

SG: In bionic angel you manage to visualize brain activities and thought processes of people. One could say that we are already dealing with a visualisation of our cognitive processes in every day life, e.g. due to our usage of the Internet, which gets traced by big companies. Are you concerned with aspects of surveillance or censorship? Are ideas of a better world due to new technology realistic, as they interfere with economical and political interests?

MN: Surveillance and censorship are a huge concern of course! The more we are connected to the net the more we are willing to present our most private things to a huge public. The enormous success of social networks like facebook shows that 'being connected' is much more important than the content flowing through the connections. Marshall McLuhan anticipated this development in the 60s already. In 'The Medium is the Massage', McLuhan rehashed the argument - which first appeared in the Prologue to 1962's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' - that media are "extensions" of our human senses, bodies and minds. That's exactly what's happening today. And my recently born little son 'Neo' will probably not use the computer anymore to access a social network when he is my age, he will use his brain - linked directly to the net, thanks to neuronal implants.

The question is not if you head into a better world, the question is how we deal with this new world, which is going to come anyway. As I mentioned before, technology is a self-reproductive process, it does not develop linear but exponential. That's the big problem, we have less and less time to adapt to always bigger leaps of technological development. But if you can't control the process, the process controls you.

SG: Another concern of yours is the visual representation and news coverage of war and terror acts in media. How do you assess the present and future status and function of the still or moving image in this context?

MN: I think what we consider as 'photo journalism' will totally disappear in the future. The images in the context of war and terror activities are carefully controlled and staged, to benefit political intentions. On the other side, a new 'instant photo journalism' is rising, due to mobile phone images and their immediate circulation in the Internet. But the key question remains: who has produced or altered the image and which intention is underlying? Regarding terror activities one thing is clear since 9/11: the image of the event is much more important than the event itself - in the best sense of Marshall McLuhan.

SG: An overarching interest of yours is the correlation of the real and the virtual world. What do you think about the relation of the two? Should they be in balance or will the virtual world inevitably prevail, maybe even for good reasons?

MN: They should be in balance, definitely! The more our world becomes virtualized, the more people will feel a desire for 'real' things. But what is real? Step by step reality gets enhanced. The result is an 'augmented reality', a hybrid thing, merging reality and simulation, just like my artworks do. That's the big challenge for the future generation, dealing with the constant merge of reality and simulation.

SG: What are you working on at the moment? Do you have any dream science-fiction projects in mind that cannot be realized, yet?

MN: In fact during my entire life I've been having an unrealizable science fiction project in my mind, and due to new technological developments, it will be possible now to make it true. I am currently working on a new series about space technologies

– and I will fly myself into space in 2013 with the virgin galactic spaceship. I want to see the earth from above once in my life.

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