

Eavesdropping

closed circuit poetics

audio-visual installation of Toni Meštrović

14 Apr – 26 Jun 2022

By appropriating a surveillance system for the purpose of exploring its technological capacities, Toni Meštrović has made surveillance his favorite topic in recent years. In a series of exhibitions, he was developing the possibilities of a *closed circuit*, first through the interaction with visitors at the Split Art Gallery, then in Galić Salon where he examined the technology of surveillance in a situation where the technology monitored its own self, and now in MMSU Rijeka. Here, Meštrović focuses even more firmly on this tool, incorporating the element of error as a systemic possibility that radically changes the outcome – video image becomes sound and, vice versa, sound information (in the TV monitor) produces image. The “error” in this case is a non-standard combination of video and audio signals, which are normally incompatible and thus non-functional for the intended purpose – and this is precisely the space of the artist's interest. To create a setting where the poetics of translating signals on the principles of coincidence and error can take place.

Since the work is shown in the context of exhibition *Words to Be Seen*, which includes artworks from the Museum's collections that combine image and text, Meštrović's installation can be interpreted as a transfer of visual information into sound, which relates it to the main theme of the exhibition. To put it in the words of the media research that moves from the area of language and image to the area of sound, with paradox as its pivot: a surveillance system operating with image produces an audio environment where we look with our ears, instead of our eyes. This is suggested by the title itself – *Eavesdropping*.

The “mismatching” and mutual conversion of the signals (image to sound and vice versa) disrupts the order of expectations, but in addition to that, Meštrović rejects any possibility of a narrative understanding of the image. Instead, he molds the sound space in the darkened hall, where the only source of light comes from TV screens transmitting ascetic, non-suggestive, black and white abstract surfaces. With this, the visual component of the work falls in the background, and the immersion into sound liberates the process of listening. Unlike image, sound reveals itself in all its compositional fullness, thanks to the processing of the computer algorithm that controls the movement of sound: this is where Meštrović takes the stage as an author, outperforming the dryness of the given technological structure. In the constellation of

two surveillance cameras connected to two mutually activated television monitors, the images converted to sound are transmitted to a multichannel speaker system arranged in the form of an ellipse that does not have an aesthetic but acoustic function.

Meštrović undoubtedly advocates the autonomy of sound at the expense of image, because image itself does not convey any explicit content, so by paraphrasing the idea of a *visual* or *pictorial turn*, we may say this is a *sound turn*. For this reason, we can justifiably call *Eavesdropping* an audible image.

Let's ask ourselves, then, is Meštrović's tendency for not showing the image actually a critique of image production in the general visualization of the world? There is no doubt that a disregard for the visible, as well as a self-referential questioning of material (hardware) characteristics of the tool, carries the implications of an iconoclastic letter of the neo-avant-garde. The neo-avant-garde quenched its raging thirst for new possibilities of technology with countless experiments with electronic equipment; since the original purpose of the equipment was not artistic, these experiments represented an unexplored field of new knowledge.¹ While *closed circuit* was generally used to transmit image and allowed for a mirroring confrontation with self (artist's or visitor's), invoking a process of identification, *Eavesdropping* opens up a space of dissociation where sound comes out as a digression, due to the error of miss-connection made at the beginning.² Fundamentally non-sensual, unspectacular in a fluxus-like manner, and yet conceptually poetic, the work does not depend on visitors, but includes them, either as observers and witnesses to duration, or as random passersby captured by the eye of the cameras.

¹ Some musicians and visual artists in the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s experimented with electronic devices, from radars, oscilloscopes, radios and TV sets, to constructed video synthesizers, which has redrawn the traditional boundaries between visual and non-visual, artistic and non-artistic. Among them were Benjamin F. Laposky, Norman McLaren, John and Whitney, Karl Otto Götz, Nam June Paik, Shuya Abe, Steina and Woody Vasulka, Steve Rutt, Bill Etra, Stephen Beck. Many of them looked up to artists from the period of historical avant-gardes, who were pioneers of such reflections, such as Naum Gabo and members of the Bauhaus.

² In his works that premiered at an exhibition at Parnassus Gallery in Wuppertal in 1963, which was considered a turning point in video art, Nam June Paik did the other way round – he connected TV sets to microphones that altered the image on the screens. Cf: Edith Decker-Phillips, *Paik Video*, Station Hill Arts, Barrytown LTD, New York, 1998, p. 12. 32-40.

I'm guessing: the *closed circuit* on which *Eavesdropping* is based is a prototype of the situation “I see and I have been seen”³ which Meštrović uses not so much to deal with the topic of privacy as to deal with the order of meaning and effect of surveillance in a culture where production of images is endless. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that the principle of a *closed circuit* is written into the structure of a system exhausted in its self-sufficiency. It points to a crisis and calls for a renewal of sense.

³ Willibald Sauerlaender believes that the thought originally belongs to the philosopher George Berkeley and his statement “to be is to be perceived” (*Esse est percipi*), Willibald Sauerlaender: “Iconic Turn? – molba za ikonoklazam”, *Europski glasnik*, 10 (2005), Zagreb, 589-601.