

Miljana Niković

Miljana Nikovic is an architect and researcher experimenting with audiovisual forms and words combining multiple languages. She currently works on her art-driven doctoral thesis and archival video project about filmed urban spaces and their perceptions through collective memories and sociopolitical transformations. Her most recently published texts deal with found-footage techniques and re-appropriation of film archives in the context of Yugonostalgia. Her experimental video-poems have been screened at various international film festivals and cultural events. In 2020 she was finalist at the Fotogenia Festival in Mexico with her video-poem *The Viral Shore*. In 2021, she received the "Significant Achievements" Award at the Alternative Film/Video Festival in Belgrade for her video-poem *A Line Is Not A Line*.

TITLE OF THE CONTRIBUTION

CITIES ON SCREENS OR SCREENS OF CITIES

REFLECTION ON DESIGN DRIVEN RESEARCH APPROACH

Throughout my journey as a PhD candidate using design-driven methods, I have noticed a range of concerns towards the understanding of my artistic practices while being a trained architect. Parallel to my doctoral research, as a video-artist, I have been experimenting with various topics that are seemingly distant from my thesis. But while building my videography around questions primarily related to emotions, technologies, ecologies, or languages, I was indirectly (thus, unconsciously) exploring the very core of my thesis: discontinuity — in all its forms. Among them, I recognize various types of discontinuity leading to multiple levels of interpretation with techniques employed in the footage that I edit. Progressively preoccupied by discontinuity, it took me some time to comprehend the actual "intersections" between my academic and artistic research. Now being perfectly aware of the indivisible connections between these two "types" of research, it is obsolete to keep wondering whether design is influenced by theory or vice versa.

(Un)surprisingly, one common remark that I get about my videos after revealing my architectural background is: "oh, of course, this explains a lot!" — which implies assumptions based on popular ideas of how architects tend to create and "construct" their designs. Perhaps I fall in some patterns because of my inclinations for particular principles from both disciplines. However, it is difficult to situate my design within so many influences and aspirations — some of which I adopt or maintain tacitly. This "non-intentionality" brings further ambiguity in the "scientific" conditions of design-driven methods.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT ABOUT CERTAIN ARTEFACT(S)

"We are surrounded today, everywhere, all the time, by arrays of multiple, simultaneous images. In the streets, airports, shopping centers, and gyms, but also on our computers and television sets. (...) Rather than wandering cinematically through the city, we now look in one direction and see many juxtaposed moving images, more than we can possibly synthesize or reduce to a single impression."¹

FOREWORD

After having participated in three CA²RE conferences, I needed to take some distance to better focus on the research essence and digest the cumulated feedback. Now I am exactly at a crossroads of my exploration process. Thus, the proposed theme at the upcoming meeting in Zagreb perfectly describes my current status as architect, researcher, and video-artist — *intersections* of: career choices, endorsed disciplines, used media, objectives, and introspections. Being at the intersection means being obliged to gather previous experiences and integrate them in outlined agendas. However, as my audiovisual conceptions evolve primarily through film editing and montage techniques, *intersections* literally involve the *cuts between*.² Indeed, although I have a determined structure and concept before starting a project, it is only while I play with selected elements, that new ideas and results take shape. Similarly to laboratories, where chemists mix two or more substances and obtain un/expected "solutions" — architects and filmmakers obtain un/predictable answers when they "test" their intentions with sketches, sections, sequences, overlays, models, etc.

For example, Charles Eames defines models as tools to "communicate about a structure" of interest, and distinguishes them in two categories: "models before the fact" such as architect's proposal before construction; and "models after the fact" such as molecules made by scientists.³ Indeed, the Eameses consider themselves as "model-makers" trying to "convey [*their*] own understanding."⁴ Even their acclaimed *Powers of Ten* (9min, 1977) is a "sketch film," just as their other films are only "attempts to get across an idea" applied "as a tool someone else has developed."⁵ In that sense, models can also be at the intersection of "before" and "after" the fact, which is exactly how I view my experiments.

¹ Colomina, Beatriz. 'Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture'. *Grey Room 2* (2001): 6-29. Grey Room, Inc. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology

² Etymologically, the word "intersection" comes from "inter" (between) and "secare" from its root "sek" (to cut).

³ Eames, Charles. "On Reducing Discontinuity" in: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Mar., 1977, Vol. 30, No. 6, pp. 24-34. American Academy of Arts & Sciences

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Schrader, Paul. "Poetry of Ideas: The Films of Charles Eames" in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Spring 1970, pp. 2-19

CONFIGURATION

As I plan to be physically present in Zagreb, the theme *intersections* is for me a stimulating opportunity to probe a hybrid way of mixing design driven questions. Therefore, I propose a presentation format different from that of my past interventions, with an experimental lecture-performance. This time, I want to step outside of conventional academic "one-screen-one-voice" setups, by embracing the spatial context and enveloping the audience in an immersive atmosphere. Of course, I will expose some of my latest outcomes in the frame of my doctoral research, but by integrating the actual "instrument" of my subject — a multichannel video installation, based on my latest audiovisual experiment. For this, I need one microphone and at least three types of screens:

- a regular projection surface linked to a projector (placed in the central part of the room), connected to a sound system and my laptop
- a plasma display or equivalent (e.g. TV), optionally set on a movable structure
- a computer monitor, positioned on a desk, connected to internet

If any additional screens are available (regardless of size or type), I will be happy to use them to test unique spatial outcomes according to the room where the event will take place. The exhibition area(s) should be as dark as possible to allow the best perceptibility of the projected images. Ideally, the audience will have the option to walk around the screens.

ARTEFACT(S)

In my research, I question audiovisual representations and perceptions of my hometown (Belgrade) through one filmed location (Terazije Square) and the concept of discontinuity. In the first part of my presentation, I will shortly introduce this topic while simultaneously projecting selected segments of my past and ongoing audiovisual experiments. Then, I will mention some inspiring video installations or expanded cinema references connected to architecture or engaging with urban elements, especially focusing on pioneering multi-media presentations produced by Charles and Ray Eames — who "treated architecture as a multichannel information machine. And, equally, multimedia installations as a kind of architecture."⁶

"All of the Eameses' designs can be understood as multiscreen performances: they provide a framework in which objects can be placed and replaced. (...) Spaces are defined as arrays of information collected and constantly changed by the users. (...) The space of a newspaper or an illustrated magazine is a grid in which information is arranged and rearranged as it comes in: a space the reader navigates in his or her own way, at a glance, or by fully entering a particular story. The reader, viewer, consumer, constructs the space, participating actively in the design. It is a space where continuities are made through 'cutting.' The same is true of the space of newsreels and television."⁷

⁶ Colomina (2001)

⁷ *ibid.*

The second part of my lecture-performance will be complemented by my most recent 3-channel video installation *Almost White City On Barely Black Screens* (15min, 2023). This new experiment exploits and subjectifies the making-of process of my doctoral research. Furthermore, it implicitly thematizes the problems occurring during the research in three parts, through: conceptual, material-archival-administrative, and technological challenges. Echoing the Eameses' method of "information-overload"⁸ before even being aware of these means, my "sketch" offers more data than what one can process. Moreover, this is only one of the results noticed *after* I have finished the montage, and the method was happening *while* I was testing several techniques — thus at the intersection of "before" and "after" the fact, moments disclosed earlier.

(NON-)EXPLICATIONS

"Eames's innovation (...) is a hypothesis about audience perception (...). The viewer must rapidly sort out and prune the superabundant data if he is to follow the swift progression of thought. This process of elimination continues until the viewer has pruned away everything but the disembodied Idea. By giving the viewer more information than he can assimilate, information-overload short-circuits the normal conduits of inductive reasoning. The classic movie staple is the chase, and Eames's films present a new kind of chase, a chase through a set of information in search of an Idea."⁹

When discussing design-driven research methodologies, it is often debated whether we are expected to explain and describe our experiments.¹⁰ Mostly, it is argued in favor of the results that *complete* the research by forming a whole entity rather than an additional *artifice*.

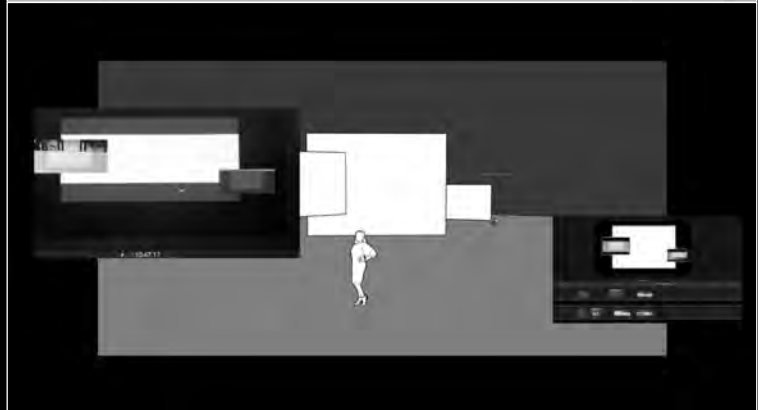
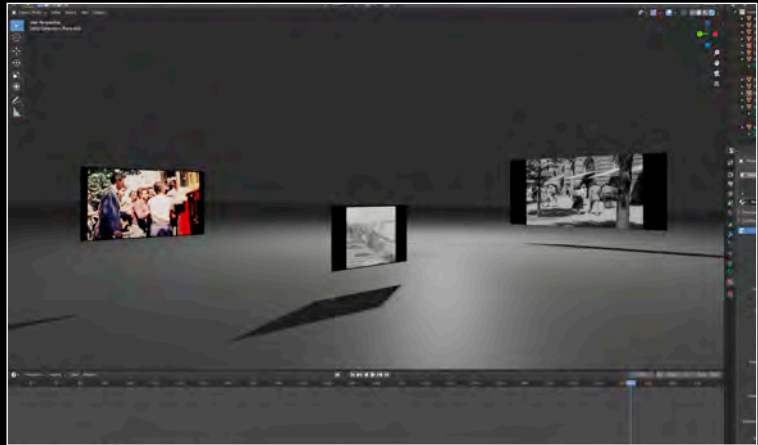
This polarity is partially a tempting reason to "intersect" such dualistic methods by mixing softwares, narratives, genres, aesthetics, structures, forms, theories, etc. Contrariwise, assuming that it is not relevant to provide a detailed analysis of the experiments (as they should be self-evident), what if precisely the exercise of clarification makes us notice a second or third reading layer of interpretation? Besides, the fact that my experiment is "only" a document supposed to reveal a "behind-the-scenes" moment of *fabrication*, it can be understood as a method or tool of further investigation in the design process. Finally, as the piece is purposely left unfinished, its "undone" form invites us to appreciate the chaotic or confusing character of *intersecting* ideas, references, methods, sounds, and images. Suddenly, incompleteness becomes its signature, acknowledged in the synopsis.

⁸ Schrader (1970)

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ For instance in the written part of the thesis or a public presentation.

Screenshots before, during
and after the editing of the
3-channel video installation
*Almost White City On Barely
Black Screens* (15', 2023)



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