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## Digital Memoirs

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### ‘MONUMENT TO THE TIME ELAPSED’.

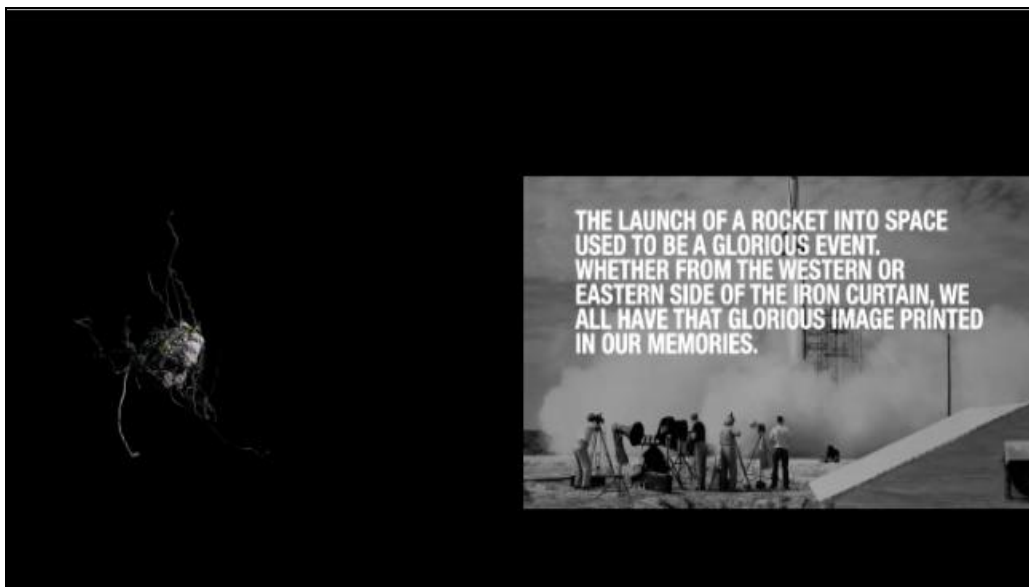
### KRASSIMIR TERZIEV ON DIGITAL JUNK AND DATA STORAGE, TOTAL IMMERSION AND POST-INTERNET ART

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The interview/digital memoir is a follow-up to a talk on ‘Intimate Distance’ given by Krassimir Terziev in 2013 at the workshop *Digital Creativity in Times of Crisis: Bulgarian Networked Culture in Global Contexts* at the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia (<http://www.cas.bg/en/>). The interview was held via e-mail in December 2014—January 2015. Questions by Henrike Schmidt.

**Digital Icons:** *In your video installation ‘A Message from Space in my Backyard’ (2008/09), you touch upon the topic of space junk, that is, the remnants of space technology, rockets and satellites that drift through outer space, which are occasionally found in ‘our backyards’ around the world after re-entering Earth’s atmosphere. Let us take a look at a still from the video, with a characteristic quote:*

**Image 1.** Videostill: ‘A Message from Space in my Backyard’ (2008/09); two channel video installation 16’, HD video, PAL, Color, Mute 200x365x365 cm.



Source: K. Terziev, <http://www.terziev.info/en/works-grid/item/6-a-message-from-space>

*Can we compare the collective memory and worldwide euphoria of 'space invasion' with the so-called 'digital revolution' in the early 1990s? And if so, how far is this collective imagery shared in the East and West? In what ways is it different?*

**Krassimir Terziev:** What struck me with the phenomena of space junk and provoked me to make that work was the paradoxical shift in spatial hierarchies that it brings. The sky was once heaven and was inhabited by the divine. There are numerous depictions in the history of painting in Europe with faces turned in prayer up to the sky, exceptional humans ascending to the sky, or the sky opening and deities descending to the earth. With the rise of orbit debris, the sky became a graveyard, a space accommodating the excrement of the 'man in space' project. The dysfunctional objects re-entering Earth become messages from space, half-humans, half-aliens.

In a way, both the euphoria of the conquest of outer space and the so-called 'digital revolution' were seen as achievements of progress; both broke boundaries and were advancements towards one, united, globalized world. The first made our traditional, linear perspective obsolete, the second made the vector of linear history go beyond the vanishing point, by modifying the idea of linear, chronological history to one characterized by complex relations between distant nodes in time and geographical space. Both were loaded with promises that could not be sustained for long. If I may freely evoke Virilio here: the promise of a crash came hand in hand with the technology that supported both projects. The aftermath of both euphorias replaces metaphors of free flight, or surfing, with metaphors of 'free falling' (as Hito Steyerl drew on the subject) or drifting - the notion of uncontrolled movement through real or digital space.<sup>1</sup>

For me, living in Bulgaria, the digital revolution of the 1990s carried the promise of opening the country to the wider world, a world I knew only from literature, cinema and TV. It did indeed open it, but from the promise of the 'free movement of people, ideas and capital', only capital's free movement became a reality.

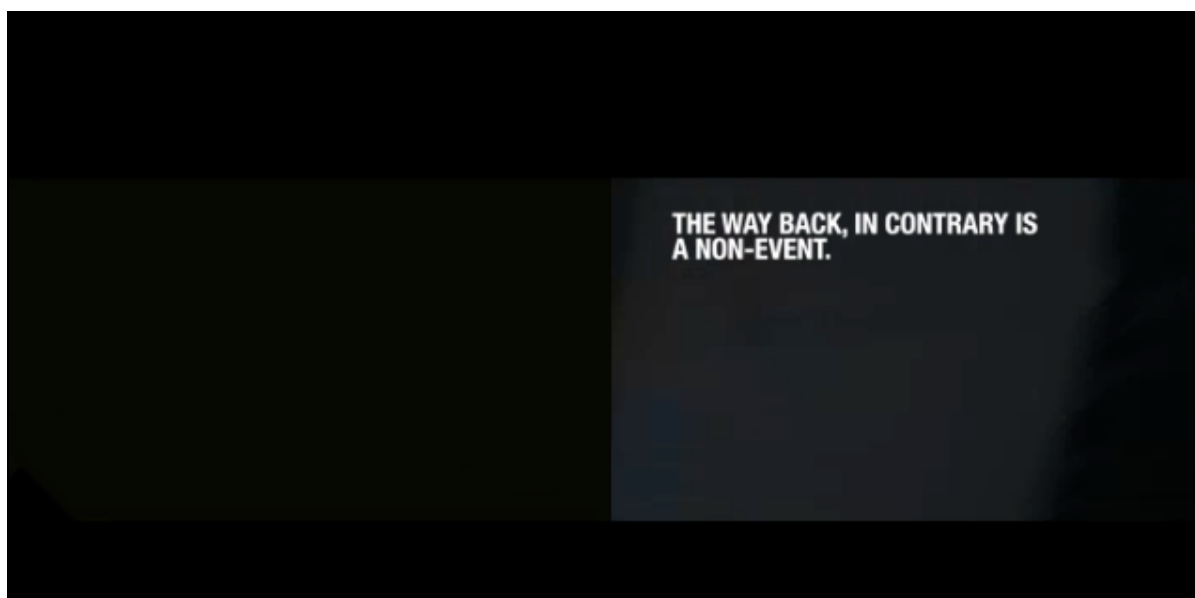
**DI:** *'If the launch of a rocket into space used to be a glorious event, [...t]he way back, in contrary is a non-event.'* *If we extend the notion of 'orbit junk' to the realm of cyberspace, what role does 'digital junk' play in today's digitized culture?*

**KT:** Orbit debris resembles digital junk in many ways. Orbit debris is there 'in the air', but is invisible, unless a manned vehicle hits it or it re-enters Earth's atmosphere for any number of reasons. The same is true for digital junk - it floods the net but gets our attention only if it escapes all filters on the way. Both are suppressed leftovers of the abandoned projects of modernism that drift freely in a space with little gravity. Both are among the few common denominators of the globalized world.

<sup>1</sup> Steyerl, Hito (2011). 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective'. *e-flux journal* #24, April 2011, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/> (accessed 27 March 2015).

Orbit debris signals the non-sustainability of the space race, and challenges the concepts of progress and constant technological advancement. Digital junk belongs to a different kind of space, the sheer space of the constant present, to be stored forever in cyberspace. After the brief play in the spirit of “who, where, and what do you want to be today?” in post-modernist aesthetics that the rise of the net brought, we seem to be slowly entering a new (but darker) age, where rumors, trolling, conspiracy theories and all sorts of phantasmagoria flood communication channels to the degree of reaching a state of total disorientation. Instead of enlarging our horizons, online activity makes us more and more stuck in our own claustrophobic pits, fed with fake drugs, hyper-nationalisms, new-age mythologies and all sorts of other rubble from pre-modern times.

**Image 2.** Videostill: ‘A Message from Space in my Backyard’ (2008/09); two channel video installation 16’, HD video, PAL, Color, Mute 200x365x365 cm.



Source: Krassimir Terziev, <http://www.terziev.info/en/works-grid/item/6-a-message-from-space>

**DI:** *In your 2013 solo exhibition ‘Cosmopolis’ at the ICA in Sofia, you displayed an installation called ‘Monument to the time elapsed’, which consists of a laptop with a picture of you engraved onto the screen. Is this a kind of nostalgic gesture, a farewell to the heroic period of early digital and networked culture, when the utopia of a new or even better world through technology still existed?*

**Image 3.** ‘Monument to the time elapsed’, 2013, 30x33x27 cm, notebook, engraved drawing



*Source:* Krassimir Terziev, <http://www.terziev.info/en/works-grid/item/144-cosmopolis>

**KT:** Well, I would not call every look back ‘nostalgic’. Technology flattens time and extends it to a never ending present of the latest hype. But at some point sooner or later a human needs to break out of the loop, some time to look back in order to go forward. There is no embrace of any ‘better’ past in my gesture. I simply exhibited my old laptop, the first one I ever had. It lasted for six to seven years, and a friend of mine once made a joke that it looked like a prop from a James Bond movie. It’s trivial (but true) to say that it was my closest companion for most of the day in those years, displaying myriad flickering images, and when it died the dark mute screen was unbearable. The only image that kept a longer presence on the screen, and was still there on the black surface after the machine’s death, was the reflection of my own face, staring at it. So, with the help of a friend (Hristo Mladenov), I engraved it with a very traditional technique in graphics, known as ‘Drypoint’, that apparently they use nowadays to decorate graveyard tombstones in our culture.

**DI:** *Memory, to which the notion of the monument is closely linked, is a key concept in cultural and digital theory. Recent research analyzes the role memory plays in global culture, which performs its mnemonic policies to a large extent through interaction in social networks. This is certainly interesting, not least in relation to the so-called ‘web wars’ of com-*

*peting memories and their political instrumentalization. One might only think of the actual digital propaganda wars between Russia and Ukraine.*

*But what role does memory play with regard to the history of the digital itself? With its explosive dynamics, digital culture seems to constantly destroy its own memory, to constantly overwrite its own legacies. If we are able to conserve or excavate to a certain extent the hardware and the material matter of early digital culture, as wittily displayed in your painting 'Archaeological site', how are we going to conserve, or at least remember, the practices and genres of digital and networked communication of recent decades? And should we?*

**KT:** I had a short but memorable conversation with the experimental film artist Gustav Deutsch last year, and one of the issues that we discussed was the recent instability of digital image-making technology. He said he envisions that this period will be marked as a dark age in terms of what is visually archived worldwide. His statement summed up all my fears up to date, and I share that view, seeing how my own archives diminish gradually with every new generation of media and media storage standards.

It is yet another paradox that the increase of options to store data in various digital memory containers (including online server storage volumes that keep, in unprecedented ways, all traces an individual has ever left), at the same time leads to a total loss of memory in the long run. Most of my early projects or the projects we were doing collectively in inter-Space back at the end of 1990s are gone, and almost no documentation exists.

My feeling is that this is one aspect that brings us to a pre-modern state of affairs where only stories are kept. Only this time it is not oral performances, but talk in social media. It perfectly suits the global politics of affect, ruling amidst rumors, fear and shock.

In Bulgaria, despite recent attempts to regulate communications infrastructure by burying it underground, large parts of wiring are still very visible - thick bundles of cables hang on the streets between power poles, or draw complex curves on building facades and interiors. Old cables are kept in place, new ones are laid on top - a palimpsest, in which there is no way to tell which cable actively connects nodes and which one is just a remnant of once-existing network.

My favorite scene observed daily is the operation of communication companies' wiring teams, opening manholes on the streets and laying cables of various thickness and color between them. Inside it's another abyss of cables - no way to tell what is what.

We seem to be still going through a period of technological fermentation, with no dominant designs or formats to stabilize the mediascape. So, maybe, as happened in the early stages of photography, when all the inventions, gadgets and formats before the Kodak model were left in oblivion, the same fate awaits most of our contemporary media production.

**Image 4.** ‘Archaeological Site’ (2008) acrylic/canvas, 46/65 cm (Missing Scenes II, 2008, painting series, acrylic/canvas, dimensions variable)



*Source:* Krassimir Terziev, <http://www.terziev.info/en/works-grid/item/22-missing-scenes-2>

**DI:** *I would like to stick a bit more to the early times of digital culture, its heroic era, as this interview will be part of our journal’s digital memoirs section. Now, two decades later, our memory of these early times starts to fade. On your homepage you list only works later than 2000. What artistic projects of the 1990s relating to computer and digital technology do you remember as important, in Bulgaria and beyond? Which were the artworks, books, technologies and people that inspired you at the time?*

**KT:** As for my website, I list a few works from the 1990s as well, but it is true that in my archive, the decent documentation dates from 2000 onwards.

I have to admit that although I devoted a large part of my time from 1998 until 2004 in founding (with Petko Dourmana and Ventsislav Zankov) and developing one of the first artists’ associations in Bulgaria purely focused on new media - interSpace Media Art Centre - I was never fully part of the new media art scene that was very vivid in this part of the world in the 1990s. I was moved by the writing of Hakim Bey, the work of artists like Heath Bunting, Vuk Cosic, Alexei Shulgin, but that was not an influence strong enough to materialize in my

work. My longer affiliation was, and still is, with the moving image, and my sources of inspiration come from cinema, experimental film and video. Back in 1997 I was in Amsterdam, having three pieces broadcast by the art channel 'PARK 4.D.T.V', and saw the work of Aernout Mik, 'Lick'. That was a profound encounter. The following year, during a residency in New York, I saw Harun Farocki's 'Prison Images' for the first time, which left a steady mark in my memory. The moving image is a field of work that fully developed in Bulgarian contemporary art. There are numerous pieces and artists I can quote here, that are of importance to me. Starting with Kalin Serapionov's video 'The Museum—Cause of Meeting and Acquaintance' (1997); the interactive installation 'Revolution for All' (1998) by Luchezar Boyadjiev, Daniela Kostova's video 'I See' (2001), 'CELEBRATING the NEXT TWINKLING' (1999) by Boryana Rossa, among many, many others.

**DI:** *Now, in the post-heroic time of digital culture, it is common to diagnose the early period of cyberspace euphoria as characterized by a striking mixture of cultural naiveté and a strong need for a new mythology, in seemingly post-modern times. With what kind of feelings do you look back into (your) digital history?*

**KT:** It is true, I too often discover how naive my beliefs were in the 1990s - that what happened in Bulgaria or in south-eastern Europe was a kind of temporary sickness that would be quickly overcome, and that new global online culture would be instrumental in bringing new values to overthrow old misconfigurations. But I would not dismiss all that energy as what we could call naiveté.

With the years, I clearly realize that I am a child of an earlier epoch, where objects had a distinct identity: a TV was TV, a computer was an assemblage of boxes connected via various cables, a photo camera was something completely different from a video or a film camera. Now when more and more devices have imaging capabilities and computing power, I have more difficulties taking photographs or video. I get dizzy when choosing which device I should pick in order to capture an image or display it. There used to be a time when taking part in an exhibition required certain negotiations—how work gets from my hands to the exhibition and back, how it is displayed, etc. Now I often just upload a file to be downloaded by the exhibition organizers. That makes the operation not much different from what I do on my social media profiles.

**DI:** *New media studies related to the so-called 'countries in transition' often subsume a strong relationship between the political and social revolutions of the late communist era and the media revolution of the early digital and computer age. Manuel Castells, for example, insinuates that the Soviet Union would not have dissolved without the latent pressure of emerging computer technology, which undermined the totalitarian modes of direct censorship. Russian digital natives of this first hour also tend to underline the symbolic value of communication technology in the early 1990s, related to a new and overwhelming experience of freedom of expression. Do you see any such linkages between political transformation in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and the early phase of the implementation of digital and computer technology?*



**KT:** Let's remember Harun Farocki's film, 'Videograms of a Revolution' (1992). His narrative points very clearly to the links between the explosive events in the former Soviet bloc countries and the myth of television. We had a very memorable event in Bulgaria with similar circumstances and about the same time—1990—which I see, seriously or not, as the first video art piece done in the country. During one of the first massive demonstrations in front of the parliament in Sofia, the then Prime Minister (from the former Bulgarian Communist Party) was videotaped saying 'Let the tanks come', by one of the country's then established film directors, Evgeny Michaylov. It was a major trigger for the government's resignation. There were numerous expert analyses, attempting to confirm the authenticity of the recorded words, which never provided actual proof, but the video went viral and is now iconic for the period of transition. For me, personally working with video gave a strategic advantage, since the light weight of the medium allowed work to be easily disseminated internationally.

**DI:** *Let's come back to the question of materiality and the digital. In one of your photographs from the series 'Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort...' (2011), you offer an impressive picture of the computer technology and paraphernalia needed in order to produce the seemingly disembodied and dematerialized worlds of digital content. Can you comment on the role that computer technology plays in your work with regard to its material side, its technical apparatus?*

**KT:** In most of my work, I was interested in the mechanics of the apparatus that produces images on the screen. In many cases it is not the computer or post-production technology, but the technology and circumstances of production that interested me. Instead of generalizing, I would prefer to give a few examples. In 2004, I staged a one day film production. I hired fifty extras, booked a film set in the 'Boyana' Film Studios (the main compound of the film industry in Bulgaria), and used period costumes from the studio's specialized wardrobe (a collection accumulated from film productions across the decades). The extras were dressed in random order representing characters from various historical epochs, and left on the set to wait for an 'action' signal. Three cameras from different angles followed the behavior of the people, during the long hours of waiting. After five hours, the group was dismissed without further explanation. The result was a two channel video installation entitled 'A Movie'. In 2005, I made a documentary that traced the routes of the global production of the motion picture 'Troy', and the world of cinema, seen through the eyes of the extras in the movie, who happened to be of Bulgarian origin. The narrative revealed the complex relations and global reach of the production, as well as the harsh conditions and exploitation of cheap labor beneath the glamorous surface of the final product. In 2011, in a two channel video installation, two cameras on a dolly in a looped tracking shot followed the physical efforts of two grip assistants running back and forth, while constantly replacing the modular rail segments supporting the movement of the dolly, un-mounting those behind the platform and mounting them in front of it, in order to perpetuate the movement. In short, I tend to turn the circumstances of producing, showing and disseminating an image into the subject of my work.



**Image 5.** Color photograph, #3/6 archival inkjet print on 310 g paper mounted on aluminum, 90/135 cm each, part of the series ‘Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort...’ (2011)



Source: Krassimir Terziev, <http://www.terziev.info/en/works-grid/item/123-just-as-water-gas-and-electricity>

**DI:** *In the blurb of your book ‘Re-composition. Author, Media and Artwork in the Age of Digital Reproduction’,<sup>2</sup> you write that contemporary technology might have accomplished the revolutionary agenda of the early avant-garde movement. Ironically (or cynically), these new technologies at the same time seem to perfectly fit into post-Fordist industrialism and capitalism. This is a thought that has also been expressed by Lev Manovich in his famous book on ‘The Language of New Media’.<sup>3</sup>*

*I’d like here to focus on another aspect, another possible difference between early avant-garde art and post-media: Can we talk about a possible trend in digital culture/digital art moving away from techniques of estrangement, defamiliarization (the famous principle of *ostranenie*) to techniques and functions of ‘total immersion’ (as one of your paintings from the ‘Missing scenes’ series of 2008 is titled)? And can this possibly be related to the paradoxical formulation of ‘intimate distance’ that you proposed in your talk at our workshop in Sofia in 2013?*

<sup>2</sup> Terziev, Krassimir (2012). *Recomposition. Author, Media and Artwork in the Age of Digital Reproduction*. Sofia: Iztok-Zapad & ICA-Sofia.

<sup>3</sup> Manovich, Lev (2001). *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

**Image 6.** 'Total Immersion' (2008), acrylic/canvas, 46/65 cm (Missing Scenes II, 2008, painting series, acrylic/canvas, dimensions variable)



*Source:* Krassimir Terziev

**KT:** I was interested in the effects of immersion long before that painting, in a series of works centered on the use of extras in film production. In 'Battles of Troy' for example, I was interested in how the extras in the movie 'Troy', being immersed in the illusionist space created by the scenography, costumes and choreography of the battle scenes, experienced a kind of delirium that caused them to get carried away and totally get into the battle, resulting in injuries, broken legs and limbs.

The drive behind immersive imaging technologies is really disturbing. It has destroyed cinema and turned the ritual of movie-going into an infantile immersion in hyper-real 3D visualization while eating popcorn. But more disturbing is the fact that it is a marriage between entertainment and the military complex. The contemporary war at a distance that has been implemented with the help of immersive visualization technologies in places like Iraq and Afghanistan is not only deeply perverse, but seems to be triggering unforeseen effects. Walter Benjamin gave cinema the legacy of being our optical unconscious, being able to penetrate the surface of the world in ways unreachable for human perception. It looks like the military immersive visual technologies of smart weapons and drones alike take that vector to a radically different plane. They create the delusion that it is not only possible to penetrate

the surface of things, but also to penetrate the bodies of other human beings, and turn them into things, into animated characters.

At the same time, we witnessed an unpredictable twist in which reality takes revenge and shows that the distance to war zones that these technologies allow could only be sustained temporarily, and as we see with the rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, the war only came closer to our homes.

**DI:** *You work with a very broad spectrum of artistic techniques and materials: painting, photography, video and film installations and object art. Media art or digital art is often defined as artwork, which cannot be displayed beyond the screen, which cannot be ‘extracted’ from the places and performances of media interaction. In other words, artwork is strongly dependent on technological apparatus. How would you define the core characteristics of media and digital art today, in an era of overall digitization? ‘In the Twilight of Post-media: Everything is Digital but can we talk about Digital art?’ is the title of a talk that you gave at the ‘Artists talk about art’ series, initiated by the Open Arts Foundation in Sofia. A good question indeed! Do you have an answer for those who could not attend the talk at the time?*

**KT:** That is the orthodox view of the field of new media art, but as I said earlier, I have never myself felt comfortable in that field. My work is maybe closer to what has recently been labeled ‘post-internet’ art, associated with the post-media condition, with the difference that I am much older than most of the artists who have become visible under that label and have been doing what I do long before that term became public. As you defined it, if digital art is an ‘artwork which cannot be displayed beyond the screen’, I am interested in everything that pops out of that screen and interferes, or even manifests itself in reality. If I may invoke Manuel Castell here, I am not interested in virtual reality, but in the effects of ‘real virtuality’,<sup>4</sup> as he coined it. Nicolas Bourriaud also had a firm position on this, introducing his ‘law of relocation’, demanding that ‘...the main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers.’<sup>5</sup>

As for my talk, behind the title that was thought to appeal to the general audience, I was actually presenting the dynamics between technological development and institutional development of the arts field, that gave rise to the sequence of terms like media art, new media art, digital art, post-media, etc.

**DI:** *Thank you very much for the time and the ideas shared with us and Digital Icons’ readership! We are especially grateful for your permission to publish your artwork in our journal!*

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<sup>4</sup> Castells, Manuel (1996). *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* Vol. I. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Presses du réel, 67.

KRASSIMIR TERZIEV (\* 1969) is a Sofia born and based media artist and cultural anthropologist. In his work he explores the manifold transitions and tensions between a globalized world, dominated by the overwhelming multiplicity of symbolic imagery, and its material groundings in technological, physical and human 'hardware'. He holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Sofia University (2012) and an MA degree in Painting from the National Academy of Fine Arts, Sofia (1997). Besides his artistic work, which has been exhibited in numerous individual and collective exhibitions around the world, he is the author of the academic monograph *Re-composition. Author, Media and Artwork in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (2012, "East-West" and ICA-Sofia). He is the recipient of numerous international fellowships and awards, including the post of artist in residence at KulturKontakt Vienna and Akademie Schloss Solitude (Stuttgart, Germany), and the Mtel Award for Contemporary Art in Bulgaria (2011).

Terziev is an active member of the Bulgarian artistic and scientific community. He was a founder of the interSpace Media Art Centre and participated in its activities from 1998 to 2004. Currently he is a member of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Sofia. Krassimir Terziev teaches at various higher education institutions, including lecturing at the National Academy of Fine Arts, Sofia (Digital Arts/Masters). [terziev.k@gmail.com]