"SLAVKO KACUNKO: VIDEO HISTORIES, MEMORIES, AND COINCIDENCES"

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TOWARDS AN INFINITESIMAL AESTHETICS

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Looping images allows us to notice things that we have never noticed before. Looping a small but exquisite selection of the video tapes of Marcel Odenbach, Dieter Kiessling and Matthias Neuenhofer may allow the discovering of Histories, Coincidences, and Infinitesimal Aesthetics inscribed into the Video medium as its unsurpassed topicality.

An unexpected interplay of coincidences has made my personal choice of video program to present at the FOKUS video festival at Nikolaj Kunsthal very easy to make.[1] It mirrors my personal preferences while showing hugely diverse artistic approaches in their aesthetic and historical width at the same time. My respect for each of the achievements of the three chosen German artists has also resulted in the publication of three books which have given me the opportunity to enter the 'infinitesimal' aesthetics of the art of video by tackling the limitations of its verbalization.

My dissertation about Marcel Odenbach (1999) was by coincidence the first academic monograph on one German video artist. The attempt to make the methods of art history productive for the medium of video without neglecting the aspect of media aesthetics seemed to me then to be the only way to bridge traditional art historical approaches and the approaches of media theory. Analysing the individual work was regarded as an absolute precondition. While my first objective was to analyze the individual work, the coincidence led me to the insights which seemed to go beyond this individual oeuvre, laying the foundations for a future, sound art historical practice in dealing with video and media art in general. The recognition received for this "pioneering contribution to an art history of video art"[2] was followed almost immediately with a second book, a monograph about the Closed Circuit Video Installations of Dieter Kiessling (2000), an artist whose approach could not differ more from Marcel´s. The only thing which connected them then in each of their domains was, in my view, their unsurpassed quality. Another background of my seemingly schizophrenic choice at that time was the methodological need to test and deliver comprehensible instruments of registration and description which should meet the disparate

aesthetic ways of dealing with the medium of video. The narrative-associative and semantic almost overloaded approach of Marcel Odenbach stood in full contrast to Dieter Kiessling's anti-narrative and almost anti-semantic methodology, in which the story is being continuously challenged by the omnipresence of chance. Still, the two approaches seemed to be interconnected through their self-evident dealing with the human figure, which, in spite of the permanent questioning of representation, would never have become a subject of this artistic practice without the still implicit mimesis.

In contrast to these two, conceptually a video aesthetics implemented at the highest level, the only other option that would appear to remain is a synthetically produced, anti-mimetic access, which instead of narration or chance and coincidence places repetition and the loop (with its 'cumulative' character) at the center of a discrete and discontinuous video aesthetics. In the case of Matthias Neuenhofer there was no longer any question of pleasurable artistic undermining of linear narratives or of feigning the action on a variety of levels and perspectives: The coincidence of self and external reference could still be found only within the 'frame' of an abstract but associative, a closed and yet ultimately open, 'infinitesimal' aesthetics[3] – an aesthetic inherent in the medium itself by coupling its elementary components, the input and the output device together and therewith uncoupling it to a large extent from the outside world. The monograph on the Feedback-Videos of Matthias Neuenhofer completed my planned 'video-trilogy' in 2001, but it was not published until now. It pleases me all the more that it will be finally published this year as a first book in the new-founded E.V.A.-Edition Video Art (Berlin/Copenhagen), coincidently co-edited by Marcel Odenbach.

Let me close these preliminary remarks by mentioning a few more coincidences which might round out and justify my 'personal' choice: The one is that Neuenhofer as a former student of Nam June Paik's – the 'Father' of Video Art – today works at the same place where his teacher worked officially until 1995, at the famous Art Academy in Düsseldorf. Another coincidence is that

Paik´s position there remained vacant for a much too long period of 15 years before Marcel Odenbach was presented as his follower on April 1, 2010. It is almost more of a coincidence that I was nominated for a professorship of Media Aesthetics and Visual Studies on that same day in the same city (Düsseldorf) and at the same university that issued my pioneer dissertation about Marcel Odenbach. After all those coincidences, it is almost needless to mention, that Dieter Kiessling still lives in Düsseldorf, the same city that has obviously demonstrated an unequalled ambivalence towards its own (un) known and – without doubt – globally relevant video art history.

MARCEL ODENBACH

Stepping away from the slippery surface of coincidence to attempt a focus on the visible 'facts' of Odenbach's video piece, one may immediately notice – it remains a walking on the spot. Or, as the title of his last 'pure' conceived one-channel videotape (not intended for installation) suggests, *Estar de pie es no caerse* (1989) – to stand means just not to fall down. It is precisely the more than disturbing scene of the fall that enters the five minutes of video experience: the video begins with a barely 30 seconds long, black and white record of the shooting of a defenseless civilian lying on the ground somewhere in Namibia. The African folk melody fades out to let us hear the voice of the Nazi judge, Roland Freisler, before the scene with a statue of a supine Pompeian volcanic ash 'mummy' leads to the onset of the string music of J.S. Bach. The step rhythm accompanied by clapping sets in again; the African folk song is followed by a sequence in which black and white photos follow each other, before the last images display a verti-

cal strip in which a white cloth appears. While the strip extends to full-screen, the still image is set into motion: we recognize a standing man, facing the camera, while the white substance proves to be the T-shirt that he wears. Through a zoom, the camera captures him up to the head; shortly after, he falls facing the ground. In the background the blue box allows us to see the frame-filling scene with two clapping hands.

The following six settings show in 3-5-second intervals alternately, detailed close-ups of hands, three times the clapping hands and in between, a scene of the rings being peeled from one hand, and the hands that delve into a trouser pocket to remove a purse and money. Finally we see a hand that opens the trouser zipper, followed by the camera rotating in a close-up around Odenbach´s head while he is given a haircut and accompanied by the soundtrack from Hitchcock´s *Birds,* and leading gradually to the exit.

The introductory sequence with the shooting of a defenseless civilian in Namibia is a scene of brutal violence which can simultaneously trigger a strong fascination, followed by relief in a kind of acoustically supported emotional involvement and thus bringing patterns of distraction in powerlessness and compassion which 'overlap' the time frame. The following, longest set of the video with the lying mummified human unfolds and displays nothing but the time we need to reflect upon the scene we were just immersed in – the unpronounceable weight of human history – a history of violence – oozes gently through our brains as we hear the 'weeping' of the violin aria "Have Mercy" of the *St. Matthew´s Passion*.

One may ask why on earth such 'obvious' and irreducible art experiences should be analyzed? At the time of my intense work with this material it seemed to me appropriate to step back with my feelings about the 'Otherness' and the 'Unspeakable' – that major attribute of large parts of German video art before 1989. Instead, I chose the 'surgical' method of re-cutting and protocol-making for each and every video, which offered both advantages and disadvantages. But in my rather naïve wish to help build a basis of a verifiable history of video

art as part of art history, the task of making the material quotable appears to me as indispensable as ever, not least because of the deconstructivistic need to question the reference – the method which Odenbach (1953) has pioneered in his own art while related theories have started to spread around the globe. Odenbach's subjective reference has nonetheless always sustained its close relationship to the related objective side of the medal, so leaving us not only with the videographic masterpieces, but also with a contribution to the semiotic, architectonic and art historical perspective – on those subjects, by the way, which he studied in the mid-1970s, as not a few artists in Germany have seemed to be bound and fascinated by the terrorism of the 'German Autumn'.

The pioneering methods of image-splitting and super-position which Odenbach brought to its first high-end results, offer quite a challenge to the researcher venturing to virtually separate two, three or more layers in order to bring the nature of their interaction into some congruence with the two-dimensional written language and any pos-

MARCEL ODENBACH, ESTAR DE PIE ES NO CAERSE, 1989, 4:58 MIN

sible serious analysis. I still believe that the underlying data collection and protocols have an important purpose of exposing the deceptive nature and the corresponding methods of video making, providing us with the critical tool for proving our discriminative faculties (tastes) and not least our everyday 'tagging' experiences.

Already in 1990 Paul Virilio wrote for the Paris exhibition catalogue *Passage de l´Image* about "Odenbach´s anorthoscopic work" which "trains us to reject any pathological fixation of vision – a fixation which would lead to optical dogmatism, rigidity in observing."[4] This clearly applies to the three chosen videotapes, showing

not least what the medium in question actually performs – a tool with potential to far transcend the range of poor Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS) as an instrument for viewing and seeing.

Interpenetrating and sliding incessantly between the 'intimate' and 'general', Odenbach´s art in its "encyclopédisme"[5] relates therefore not only to the topic of (neo-) colonialism, racism and 'otherness', but also touches on the more comprehensive problem of one´s own identity and the identity of events in general. The decisive impulses from Africa and the strong interest in 'otherness' remain his artistic and most personal need, as seen in his most recent video tape *Im Schiffbruch nicht schwimmen können* (Not able to swim in the Shipwreck, 2011). Somehow the attribute of being a 'William Hogarth' of German and European Video Art is appropriate: now as then, skin colour as a symbol of one's origin serves as a background for settings like the one of the (unexpected?, disturbing?) art consumers in the Louvre.

Odenbach's approach allows not least some very general statements. One of them is that history can surely help us to understand our time, but understanding our time might be also very valuable in the reverse process of looking at history.

DIETER KIESSLING

Crossing the patterns of transition and reflection, of history and memory as seen and conceived in Odenbach´s art, we will stumble increasingly upon patterns of coincidence. These are the stuff of the unique opus of Dieter Kiessling (1957). The second Media Art-professor at the world-famous ZKM – Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (after Marcel Odenbach, to add another 'coincidence'), he remained to some extent in the shadow of the very few video artists which are today recognized as global players. Yet the quality of his work is unequalled in its concentration and critical awareness of the different media involved. I have commented above on the immense fascination with (the want of) a 'reality' on the part of of the proponents of the various forms of contemporary Deconstructivist thought. Realities are lived out in various forms ranging from their misuse to their very destruction, and it is entirely consistent that then, the desire for this same 'reality' can never be satisfied. Kiessling´s 'irreversible' interventions in the medium

as material make it clear how the 'deconstructed' notion of a 'reality', allegedly absorbed by 'virtuality', still belongs in the realm of media fiction. One channel closed circuit video installations *Ventilator* (1994) and *Dust 2* (1996/2000) as well as their two channel equivalent *Two Cameras* (1998) deliver clear examples for that. In the place of Odenbach's seemingly 'essential otherness', Kiessling presents us with a kind of "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak) but only to leave even this relatively recent notion behind in pointing out how the ideologically banned dialectic still continues to send holistic signals towards the faint spectre of reductionist surface of the devastating deconstructive digging into the Digital Dogma. One channel (looped) video installations *Dice 2* (2001), *Eyes* (2005) and *Edge* (2010) exemplify this immanent attitude. The 'simplicity' of Kiessling´s straightforward, yet cutting interventions into the medium has a unique status between artistic and technological input and output, while carrying out a most difficult balancing act of refusing to transcend the distinction between the virtual and the real. Kiessling's methods include reintro-

DIETER KIESSLING, TWO CAMERAS, 1998, 1:61 MIN
GALERIE ROLF HENGESBACH, BERLIN

ducing the cumulative nature of time and its irreversibility, which makes him implicitly a 'genealogist' or 'historian' of the related medium, while acknowledging its most inherent and profound inclination towards immediacy and reflection. An immediacy and materiality as converged in the videotape *Fallende Scheibe* (1986, 00:45) and the continuum as looped within the two channel video installation *Paternoster* (1987) belong to a long row of systematic artistic research, in which a heuristic still remains the horizon and the point of departure as well. Keiji Nakamura concluded once with regard to the early Japanese video artists that they, "rather than approaching reality

through the medium [...] were overwhelmed by the reality of the medium itself".[6]

Kiessling instead plays with the control of the unpredictable, and his specific video work merits brief philosophical consideration at the very least. The phenomenon of feedback loops demonstrates vividly the non-repeatability of forms, of their characteristic features and times, and a parallel to A. N. Whitehead's philosophy of process can be legitimately drawn. The development of Kiessling's loop principle becomes manifest in context, given the concept of time in the philosopher's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919) and especially so in his critique of instantaneity. Whitehead's central thesis is the assumption that perception requires duration: every perception reveals a continuity of existence, of experience – the precondition for understanding matter as something enduring, i.e. that an object will subsist within the space-time position of a system of references and can be consistently perceived. Since time lends the process of 'synthetic realisation' a direction, it does in a certain sense 'transcend the

time-space continuum of nature'. But even if time is not to be considered as a single linear sequence, it is still assumed 'that the temporal process of realisation can be dissected into a group of linear, serial processes. Each of these linear series is a time-space system' (*Science and the Modern World,* 1925). A moment in time can be seen as such a time-space-system in which a pattern becomes established. Out of the repetition of patterns in successive events, time emerges. Every moment in time reveals the pattern that results in its complete form from the succession of moments in time.

Whitehead's critique of instantaneity and his inferences of process philosophy, can, at least as an implication, be best sensed in Dieter Kiessling's closed-circuit video installations. Some of the features there can be generalised with certainty and observed similarly in non-artistic feedback phenomena. In Kiessling's works, the viewer is continually challenged to discover principles of order – in time, topology, technology and other spheres – thus confirming the artistic intention of reassessing not only these but also the relation between work and

beholder; of providing that viewer with active access to the first audiovisual medium and retrospectively to his/her own 'mechanisms' including the personal constructs of reality. Regarding the inevitability that irreducible 'constructivism', the choice of Kiessling´s one- and two channel video installations (closed circuit and loops) is by all means not selfexplainable through its presented documentations. The presented accompanying text can selfexplainable not afford it either. – from obvious and im-manent reasons, laid down in the artist´s concept.

MATTHIAS NEUENHOFER

Whitehead's critique of the instantaneity of time is by no means far removed from the usual understanding of 'real time'. One of the consequences of these adjacent theoretical approaches has to be a critical evaluation of current theoretical trends that perceive computerised 'real time'-processing programmes such as 'morphing' to be a substantially new and revolutionary development with the potential to make a sharp, ontological distinction between the analogue and digital. The genealogy of both the analogue and digital 'feedback-videos' of Matthias Neuenhofer (1965) shows how distant are such emphatic-reductionist presumptions from the video- and media art practices. At the same time, his technical virtuosity ties into the described artistic field by focusing on and widening the medium's immanent operation field.

„Feeling man shoots, thinking man edits"– with this famous quote of Nam June Paik's, his professor at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, Neuenhofer began his thesis, which he completed in 1994 at the Academy of Media

Arts in Cologne. In his own video work Neuenhofer represents his agreement with "all sorts of meanings" that might be read from the aphorism, with a consistency which is rare within the media arts field in general and which he early on made part of his working method. This entails renouncing the use of a video camera while simultaneously integrating the obvious self-reflexivity of the medium through the phenomenon of video feedback. Between 1988 and 1995 it built the basis of the video works by Matthias Neuenhofer. His creative dialogue with the underlying technology thus began deliberately, consistently and independently both of 'mimetic' and 'abstract' design principles.

MIEL (1995; 6.04 min) was the last video tape of this period and also (just like Odenbach´s *Estar de pie es no caerse*) the last one to date to be designed and implemented as a one channel videotape. Neuenhofer here not only demonstrated his mastery of digital video feedback, but also consciously marked and exceeded both the supposed boundary between the so-called analog and digital design principles. *MIEL* exempli-

fies the synthesis of video feedback and a morphing phenomenon. A permanent 'growth' and self contained 'breeding' of shapes, colors, sounds and movements can be determined as an overarching formal principle of the work. Out of the variety of intersecting, overlapping or mutually repressing elements a basic 'figure' crystallizes: It is a vertical 'strip' or 'gap', set roughly in the middle of the surface and separating it by two symmetrically placed horizontals, extending in width. This almost cruciform figure zooms slowly towards the viewer and spreads itself over the scene, allowing further patterns of color and form to occasionally emerge from its opening slot.

The synaesthetic effect is carried on through synthetic sounds that cause a round of permanently changing atmospheric, zoomorphic or organic associations. In addition to the nocturnal insect noise or 'birds chirping', the acoustic ambience is characterised in particular by a slightly 'whining' sound, which could perhaps be described as a slightly slower tape-playback of a meowing cat. The 'soft' forms, slow movements and 'peaceful', enjoyable sounds seem to correspond from the beginning to the pastel, partially transparent or bright colors which themselves also determine the overall impression. Several elements 'fly' and cross each other on the scene before entering a phase (1:21 to 1:37 min), in which the basic shape (cruciform feedback in light purple) and the previously introduced orange 'gap' several times alternately, or together convert. This transformation or its digital simulation is at the same time dissimulated by Neuenhofer´s first use of morphing, a digital effect which should at least theoretically indicate a final farewell to video feedback and the 'analog' concept of irreversibility. Firstly not very noticeable (1.25 min), the morph appears as a visible form of conversion in the much longer and clearer second 'attempt' (1:29 to 1:32 min). The basic form, the purple feedback-cross with its two horizontal arms warps at a roughly 45 degree angle until it becomes equal to an opaque warm orange colour. This violent interference into the feedback flow appears as a deliberate visualization of the underlying image manipulation (revealing of course the intention and the discriminative faculty of its author) which is confirmed and continued by the subsequent counterpoint of colors (1:37 to 1:40 min). The fine adjustment of the apparatus and of all known relevant parameters is the prerequisite for the displayed mastery of the slow feedback 'run', entailing the wealth of forms and their 'growth' potential (compatible with other figures and curves). Technically and perceptually it flows into a continuum, a *perpetuum mobile*, in which the editing cuts and interruptions remain only important as dramatic accentuations of the synthetic 'growth' of all the visual and audible components into each other. The crucial point of Neuenhofer´s working process is that all the shapes and colors protruding from the white noise have

always been chosen on a heuristic principle; through the use of morphing there came, at least theoretically, an additional, yet crucial possibility – to waive even the most General, the origin of all distinctions: the white noise of the world and the feedback sprung from it. Matthias Neuenhofer seems nevertheless to escape this theoretically fascinating and seductive potentiality. He does not fall back to a mimesis (even in its most general form and with advanced technical means of digital morphing) and makes no use of the computer-generated simulation of feedback-figures and -processes. Instead of programming the beauty of the used basic shapes, Neuenhofer gets them directly from the seemingly indiscriminate wealth of current flow, on which the source of the first distinction or difference already exists.

The possibility of the differentiated observations (and even measurements) of the chosen videos faces, however, the all-devouring difference which pours out of Deleuzian philosophy. In the case of Matthias Neuenhofer, taken here as a model, the lack of reference points from the real world, the seemingly 'anarchist'

assembly, the high motion speed of lines, surfaces and forms, their hardly exploitable structure and even the lack of a conceivable title that would give an indication (a "pattern of intention" [Michael Baxandall]) – these are all characteristics of a named but not yet developed, Infinitesimal Aesthetics the 'origin' of which seems to be the repetition, which again, as much as its 'goal' must remain unnamed, at least if the distance to the otherwise impending visual dogmatism and image-ideology should be obtained. This is not least because the results of automatism of repetition – so is at least my preliminary thesis here – lead either to an ideology of indifference or to the doctrine of difference, in both cases with poor prospects for either the Cage-Paik-avant-gardism or for Deleuze´s 'differentialism'.[7] Deleuze´s 'overcoming' of a 'simple' being by the gesture of repetition turns out to be – not least with regard to the complex perspective of the brilliant video artists reflected here – itself an unfolding of a new metaphysics, metaphysics of difference.

Turning back to our subject matter and to the last chosen videotape *QatSouk* (2009), it appears that Neuen-

hofer himself turns back – fifteen years after his seeming departure from the video feedback issue – to video as a visualizing of the analysed and synthetized time- and picture-frame of a 'casual' experiencing of foreign culture. What does not appear so obvious is the paradox of 'Z'-axis (as an equivalent of Odenbach´s "perimetral" vision as described by the above cited Raymond Bellour) or the 'deep' vision, in which the viewer has been pulled in: Not just to be aware, but to look at the frame(s) while being aware that the very act of looking ostensibly produces 'pictures' out of the gazed frames. And while we switch from an internal, in-depth-focus back to the 'whole', timed 'picture', we again realize that all the consecutive and partially overlapping 'image frames' are nothing but the casual-causal (in-)discrete and digitally processed clippings out of the unavoidable analogue time-space continuum. Not least from this 'common sense' perspective video remains probably the most prodigious artistic medium which our art, visual and modern culture is able to offer.

Notes

1. For FOKUS VIDEO ART FESTIVAL 2012 I curated a video programme consisting of the following videos: Marcel Odenbach: *Estar de pie es no caerse* (1989, 4:58 min), *Das Grosse Fenster* (2001, 12:00 min), *Im Schiffbruch nicht schwimmen können* (2011, 8:10 min). Dieter Kiessling: *Dice 2* (2001, 3:38 min), *Fallende Scheibe 2* (1986, 0:45 min), *Paternoster* (1987, 3:45 min), *Two Cameras* (1998, 1:61 min), *Eyes* (2005, 3:27 min), *Dust 2* (1996/2000, 2:57 min), *Ventilator* (1994, 1:98 min), *Edge* (2010, 2:00 min). Matthias Neuenhofer: *Miel* (1994, 6:04 min), *Qatsouk* (2009 12:10 min)
2. Excerpt from the press release DRUPA 2000, Düsseldorf.
3. Andreas Breitenstein has used this notion in his review of the novel *The Winter in the south* of Norbert Gstrein (2008) in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 26. August 2008 – Mădălina Diaconu has also used the term in the essay „Patina, Atmosphäre, Aroma. Für eine Ästhetik des Infinitesimalen." In: *Phänomenologie in Rumänien und Bulgarien* (ed. by Hans-Rainer Sepp), Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, p. 14. (Time indication: „discharged for printing").
4. *Passage de l´Image*, Musée National d´Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Exhibition Catalogue), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. p. 198/201.
5. Raymond Bellour, *Eye for I: video self-portraits*. New York: Independent Curators Incorporated (Exhibition Catalogue), p. 14.
6. Keiji Nakamura, Introduction. In: Private Visions. *Japanese Video Art in the 1980s* (Exhibition Catalogue), Japan Foundation, 1990.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (1968), quoted after German translation *Differenz und Wiederholung* (transl. Joseph Vogl). Munich 1992, p. 106.

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"...video still remains one of the most prodigious artistic mediums which our art, visual and modern culture is able to offer"

SLAVKO KACUNKO ER PROFESSOR VED INSTITUT FOR KUNST- OG KULTURVIDENSKAB, KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET.

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