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Stuff it
the video essay in the digital age

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Ursula Biemann
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Ursula Blemann
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The Video Essay in the Digital Age

Ursula Biemann

Much has happened since Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*, which had marked, in the beginning of the 80s, the emergence of a post-structuralist cinematographic practice defined as film essays. The symposium “Stuff it,” which we organized in May 2002 in cooperation with the Migr os Museum and the Videoex experimental video festival Zurich, set out to map contemporary essayist video practice, which has evolved from the previous body of cinematographic experiments, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how essayism relates to the contingent digital cultural developments today. The purpose of this gathering of international video makers and theorists goes beyond presenting a survey of existing works. It is an attempt to advance and direct the discourse into the digital age.

As a video essayist, I have a personal motivation to bring this particular video practice on the agenda. For a number of reasons, the essay situates itself somewhere between documentary video and video art. And as an in-between genre, these videos often fall through given categories at art events, film festivals and activist conferences. For a documentary, they are seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective, and for an art video they stand out for being socially involved or explicitly political.

Video essayists recognize the potential of this ambivalent position and continue a rich production of thoughtful and highly innovative videos. The idea of this conference, then, was to mark the field of a video practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political. So that we no longer look at the essay as an odd “strangeling” that refuses to behave properly within the designated categories, but rather recognize it as a distinct aesthetic strategy. It cannot, however, be the aim of this collection of texts to establish the essay as a genre and to crystallize it into a formula. Its strength lies in the quality of the mediator and communicator between differential cultural spaces.

The last major event dedicated to the essayist film was co-organized by Christa Blümlinger in 1991 in Vienna and centered around a German and French film discourse with strong ties to a literary tradition. Since then, art and media debates have greatly evolved in response to political, cultural and technological changes of the last decade. This prompted a discussion at the Institute for Theory around the particularities of this video practice and its ability to respond to and express the present time. *Stuff it* sets out to recontextualize the audio-visual essay both technologically and culturally. First of all, it is vital to look at video today within the wider development of new media, the Internet and digital image production and understand how these technologies emphasize or mutate the characteristics of the essay while opening up new possibilities for a critical engagement.
with them. The other fundamental shift is induced by the great geographic and cultural diversity of recent essayist video practice which drives the theoretical discussion from a German and French literary tradition to a postcolonial cultural studies perspective.

What makes the video essay so interesting to the Institute for Theory is precisely its commitment to theory. The videos discussed in this book are intensely involved in theoretical concerns and their mediation through a visual language. A theory of film should be a film, believes film critic Edward Small who refers to this audio-visual critical practice as “direct theory.” The videos test the possibility of theory-building through visual means, not in an illustrative manner but in a wide range of artistic, poetic, humorous and sometimes rather absurd ways. Absurdity is frequently produced through the disjointed assemblage of visual associations that do not produce continuity in content. But it is exactly these more endearing humorous qualities of the essay that make up for the demanding density proposed by the simultaneous visual, sonic and textual input, which can sometimes be exhausting and frustrating.

The essay has always distinguished itself by a non-linear and non-logical movement of thought that draws on many different sources of knowledge. In the digital age, the genre experiences an even higher concentration. New image and editing technologies have made it easy to stack an almost unlimited number of audio and video tracks one on top of another, with multiple images, titles, running texts and a complex sound mix competing for the attention of the audience. Stuff it! Distill it! Stratify and compress it! seem to be the mottos of the digital essayist.

Film scholar Nora Alter opens the collection of texts with a short review of the literary essay to highlight the many parallels that this critical, innovative written form shares with its audiovisual counterpart. Her thorough analysis of Daniel Eisenberg’s use of historic film footage in his trilogy reveals the importance of insisting on the medium film in the 90s for its potential to pass for a document that may enter history. The use of historic film material is also being addressed in Jan Verwoert’s analysis of Anri Sala’s *Intervista* in which the young Albanian video artist confronts his mother with a found sequence of an interview she had given as a young communist in Albania. The mothers simultaneous distance and identification with this material is what Verwoert refers to as “double viewing” in his text, an ambivalence that makes it possible to tell the story while at the same time critically identifying its construction. His extensive analysis of Sala’s video is representative of the lively discussion that has ignited around the appearance of documentary material in the art context in recent times. The following text by Christa Blümlinger explores the essayist approach with regard to the shift in the viewing context for video works from the cinematic setting to the exhibition space at the example of Harun Farocki’s video and installation work. Today’s digital video production is to be seen in the context of hyper text and the Internet. One of the questions will be whether and how new technologies transform the previously analogue medium of video to become more dissociative, multi-perspective and hyper textual in the structuring of images and sounds. This approach seems to suit the essayist thought pattern much better than the linear...
filmic narration that is constructed in the analogue montage. In their theory-performance based on the video *Passing Drama*, Maurizio Lazzarato and Angela Melitopoulos explore hyper textuality and non-linear montage with regard to the structures of memory and recollection. They are experimenting with different forms of collecting and writing history through videographic practice and digital image processing in an attempt to come closer to our perception of history and to the mechanism of memory in the machine age.

Essayist practice is highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning. It is consciously engaged in the activity of representation itself. These characteristics make the genre particularly suited to study complex relations. Essayist work doesn’t aim primarily at documenting realities but at organizing complexities. This ability is very valuable today since video has to respond not only to a changing media environment but also to an increasingly complex society, where the mere depiction of visible realities has become insufficient. The essay is good at capturing the more abstract, untangible processes of social and cultural transitions. Jörg Huber proposes a theory of transitionality, in which he traces and interprets the mediating feature of video-essayism and its ability to make the very process of perception visible. Some of the transitions addressed by the videos discussed in this volume deal with the shift from mechanical work processes to newer technologies, as in Harun Farocki’s work. They may address conceptual shifts in gender identity or concern a mutation in the cultural perception of memory and history, as in the videos by Rea Tajiri, Richard Fung, Mathilde ter Heijne and Johan Grimonprez.

Along these lines, my reflection on the transnational video explores the parallels between the transnational space of the global economy and the structures of essayist mental space.

A form of transition that is particularly relevant to this discussion literally relates to movements of diaspora, dislocation and migration. There are good reasons why postcolonial artists are such outstanding essayists. Their videos raise the question of how an increasingly ambivalent experience of place, nation and belonging lived by so many cultural producers today has prompted them to develop an artistic language that responds to the essayist voice, a voice that speaks from a position of placelessness. On the other hand, essayists are very engaged in rewriting the historical dimensions of places, as becomes evident in Walid Ra’ad’s *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, in which he proposes a fictitious treatment of the hostage crisis during the Lebanese civil war, and in Hito Steyerl’s *The Empty Center*, which draws an experimental political archaeology of the strip between former East and West Berlin. Rinaldo Walcott, on the other hand, opens up an expanded space of the black digital diaspora in the North Atlantic as a video-theoretical space that enters the difficult terrain of memory, slavery and black displacement with an analysis of Isaac Julien’s *The Attendant* and Dana Inkster’s *Welcome to Africville*.

More cheerful essayist methods use humor as a discursive tool. Paul Willemsen explores Steve Reinke’s merry and greatly artistic work, which moves away from recognizable documentary practice to design a creative contemporary milieu around himself that is at the same time highly personal
expression and precise social commentary. Visually sophisticated and with theoretical reference to the very act of seeing, Tran T. Kim-Trang unfolds in *The Blindness Series* a decade of essayist work which covers different pathologies of seeing and not-seeing and their metaphorical values. In the thorough essay *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and the Inscription of War) Harun Farocki pursues an ongoing fascination with the role of technology in molding our perception. His meticulous observations comment on the link between new technologies of visualizations and their role in the organization of war, as Allan J. Thomas explains in his text.

The videos *Love Hotel* and *Writing Desire* do not comment on visual technologies from afar, they actually enter and move through the electronic terrain of digital images generated by both the electronic communications networks and the landscapes visually generated by satellite media and other visual information systems. In this instance, the simultaneity and multilayeredness of ideas are produced not through linear editing but directly on the surface of the screen. These videos make apparent how closely the virtual, phantasmatic space of the internet resembles the essayist geographies driven by analysis as much as by wild analogies.

Then there are two contributions which move along the intersection of popular drama and artistic reflection: Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *Border Stasis* and Steve Fagin’s video *TropiCola*. In an interview, Steve Fagin laces an essayist fabric of Cuban life through a discussion of popular timba music. A very subjective approach to the recurring theme of “going places” and bringing back a bunch of disparate observations emerges in a video genre which is by definition essayist: the letter, the travel diary. Some are obsessively visual as Irit Batri’s *These Are Not My Images* whereas the narrative remains fragmentary and reluctant. In other works the vocal monologue offers personal and philosophical reflections that becomes the guiding thread through foreign places. In Birgit Hein’s *Baby I Will Make You Sweat*, the author reveals her most intimate concerns relating to sexuality and aging by taking us honestly through her sexual experiences in Jamaica. Unlike the documentary, which keeps the commentary closely linked to the image, in the essay the sound and image levels may diverge to the point of becoming completely asynchronous. In *Europe From Afar* by Eva Meyer and Eran Schaef f, the soft female reading voice seems to belong to a multitude of speaking subjects, who continuously entangle reality and the projections of their image of Europe fabricated from far away locations. This piece, which has been conceived as a radio play and a silent video and is sometimes, but not always, shown together, radicalizes the autonomy of image and sound so characteristic to the essay and highlights the performative moment of bringing them together.

Clearly, the following pages cannot give a complete survey of the contemporary video essay. But I hope this volume succeeds in showing how eclectic essayist video practice has been in the 90s. It emerges as an aesthetic and discursive form of video making that holds great potential for contemporary digital production in the context of a transformative global culture.
Memory Essays

Nora M. Alter

A mode of audio-visual production called the "essay film" has proliferated in the past decade. This relatively recent genre of film problematizes binary categories of representation, and fuses the two dominant genres of the medium: feature and documentary. Furthermore, the essay film often self-reflexively of fers its own film criticism. Like its ancestor, the written essay, it poaches across disciplinary borders, transgresses conceptual and formal norms, and does not follow a clear narrative trajectory. The essay film is rebus-like and hybrid, recalling the operation of memory and dreamwork.

What is an essay? Let me briefly present some formulations on the philosophical-literary form. "To essay" means "to assay," "to weigh," as well as "to attempt," suggesting an open-ended, evaluative search. But this objective search is haunted and constrained by the presence of individual subjectivity. (The verb is also linked via the Latin ex-agere to agens, the word and problem of human agency.) Current use of the word essay as a distinct genre can be traced to the sixteenth-century social critic and philosopher Montaigne, whose Essais (1580) exerted a deep influence on the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and on a variety of critics in this tradition (e.g., De Sade, Leopardi, Emerson, Nietzsche, Lukacs, Adorno, Benjamin, Barthes). By "essay," Montaigne meant the testing of ideas, himself, and society. It was a wide-ranging form of cognitive perambulation that reflected upon fundamental questions of life and human frailty, tensions and overlaps between "fact" and "fiction," and their consequences for social order and disorder. Since Montaigne, the essay has retained some of its distinguishing features. Its weapons are humor, irony, satire, paradox; its atmosphere is contradiction and the collision of opposites.

In his 1910 "letter" to Leo Popper entitled "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," Geog Lukacs seeks to legitimate the written essay, which he suggests is "criticism as a form of art." He compares the essay to other forms of literature using the metaphor of "ultra-violet rays" that are refracted through the literary prism. Lukacs characterizes the essay as both "accidental" and "necessary," a description echoed years later by Adorno in his writings on the essay, where he extolls the characteristics of "luck," "play," and "irrationality." For both Lukacs and Adorno, the essay is fragmentary, wandering, and does not seek to advance truth claims — as would, for instance, the documentary genre in the case of film. Lukacs concludes that the essay is both a work of art, due to what he calls its autonomous, "sovereign" status, and a judgement. Yet, for Lukacs the essential, value-determining thing about an essay is "not the verdict . . . but the process of judging."
Adorno takes up where Lukács left off and develops further the notion of the essay as a “critique of system” that problematizes the “absolute privilege of method.” Thought, he argues, “does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself an arena for intellectual experience without unraveling it.” Furthermore, for Adorno the essay is the consummate site for critique and its only relation to art is that it is in constant pursuit of new forms of presentation. One such innovation has been made by a group of film and video makers who have sought to produce the audiovisual equivalent of the written genre—what critics such as Edward Small have referred to as “direct theory.” Small’s starting point is the premise that written film theory, while well developed, is fundamentally flawed since words and written texts are by their very nature inadequate to theorize the constituents of a medium that is audio-visual by its very nature. In other words, parallel to August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s declaration that a theory about the novel should be a novel, Small believes that a theory of film should be a film. To this end, he proposes that “certain kinds of film and video works constitute a mode of theory, theory direct, without the mediation of a separate semiotic system.”

In her 2000 *Wiener Vorlesung*, Ruth Klüger, author of the memoir *Weiter Leben*, proposes a theory of writing Holocaust literature that combines both fact and fiction and locates its discourse in the interstices between the two. The result is a hybrid product “where we cannot really distinguish between the two and confuse fact and fiction.” Holocaust literature, she argues, is by its very nature subject to interpretation and accordingly departs from historical facts. Moreover, the complex and often self-protective nature of memory further complicates any clear “historical” rendition. Although Klüger refers specifically to Holocaust literature, I would like to extend the parameters of her argument to include other attempts to represent traumatic events in history. Furthermore, while Klüger primarily treats literature, her argument could just as adequately be applied to the visual arts and film. Indeed, the strategy of combining both fact and fiction in a single form bears a strong affinity with the audio-visual essay.

Let us recall that the essay film emerged during a period of historical crisis. The genre was first conceptualized in April 1940 by avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter. The latter was at the time in exile in Basel, though about to be deported back to Germany. Under these conditions, Richter wrote a short essay entitled “Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms” (The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film). The pioneering text proposes a new genre of film that enables the filmmaker to make the “invisible” world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen. Unlike the documentary film that presents facts and information, the essay film produces complex thought—reflections that are not necessarily bound to reality, but can also be contradictory, irrational, and
fantastic. The essay film, the author argues, allows the filmmaker to transgress the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice, granting the imagination with all its artistic potentiality free reign. As Richter puts it:

In diesem Bemühen, die unsichtbare Welt der V orstellungen, Gedanken und Ideen sichtbar zu machen, kann der essayistische Film aus einem unvergleichlich größer en Reservoir von Ausdrucksmitteln schöpfen als der eine Dokumentar film. Denn da man im Filmessay an die Wiedergabe der äußeren Erscheinungen oder an eine chronologische Folge nicht gebunden ist, sondern im Gegenteil das Anschauungsmaterial überall herbeiziehen muss, so kann man frei in Raum und Zeit springen: von der objektiven Wiedergabe beispielsweise zur phantastischen Allegorie, von dieser zur Spielszene; man kann tote wie lebendige, künstliche wie natürliche Dinge abbilden, alles ver wenden, was es gibt und was sich er finden lässt – wenn es nur als Argument für die Sichtbar machung des Gr undgedankens dienen kann.”

Richter does not explicitly link the essay film with history in his writing. However, the essay films he was to make subsequently, such as *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947), *Chess Sonata* (1957), or *Dadascope* (1963), attempt in their own way, and to greater or lesser effect, to represent specific historical moments, or periods.

Nearly forty years later, when filmmaker Alexander Kluge was faced with the difficulty of responding to the horror of the German Autumn of 1977, he picked up where Richter left off. More specifically, Kluge resorted to what was then an innovative strategy of deliberately mixing fact and fiction in a single film. The result was the remarkable 1978 omnibus production *Deutschland im Herbst*. Kluge argued that the interplay between fiction and non-fiction corresponded to the “coexistence of fact and desire in the human mind,” and that only such a slippery form could adequately produce a counter public sphere to that inculcated by the State and the press.

This strategy is in part similar to that of Rosellini, who also explored the possibility of placing fictional characters within a historically grounded space, thereby placing both the “real” and the imaginary in the same filmic frame. And as we will see later, Rosellini is an important figure for Eisenberg. At around the same time as Kluge, Hans Jürgen Syberberg confronted a similar dilemma, though in his case it was of how to produce a film about Hitler. Syberberg, too, decided in favor of an essayistic form for his epic, *Hitler: Ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977), which relied heavily on dramatic forms of play, fantasy, puppetry and the like to render the personage of Hitler. What both films try to circumvent is a roadblock called history, which has been reinforced by both collective and personal memory. Since film, video or literature is the work of representation, veracity is an impossibility for a number of reasons. These include the reality of a temporal and spatial lag between the events, for often they took place years earlier and in another place. Or, as Chris Marker quoting Boris Souvarine describes it in the CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997): “L’histoire est quelque chose qui n’as pas eu lieu, raconté par quelqu’un qui n’était pas là.” One way to get around the historical roadblock is to make a detour through fiction. Such a path does not resume historical truth, though it never the-
less leads to a representation. The trajectory of this road is not straight, as would for instance be the case in a documentary or narrative story. Rather, it winds in a complicated and at times frustrating and frustrated manner. Indeed, this has been the pattern of many audio visual essays, especially those that attempt somehow to understand the intricately woven processes of history and memory.

Let me now, in the form of an example, turn to an examination of how the formal components of one medium — film — correspond directly to the presentation of history and memory. The works under consideration will be Daniel Eisenberg’s trilogy, or rather cycle of films, *Displaced Person* (1981), *Cooperation of Parts* (1987), and *Persistence* (1997). In these films, Eisenberg, the child of Holocaust survivors, returns to Germany and Poland to try to make sense of a history (at once personal and public) and its manifestation in both the present and the past. His return to Europe, and especially the sites of his ancestry and their annihilation, is by no means unique. However, Eisenberg does it three times: in 1981, 1987, and 1997. The resulting films thus produce their own historical trajectory and their own contribution to history. For part of Eisenberg’s filmic strategy in *Persistence* was to create or establish filmic documents of the present day which might be used by someone in the future. In other words, just as Eisenberg himself has relied heavily on found footage, there is a self-conscious awareness on his part of producing found objects/footage for future use.

The first in the cycle, *Displaced Person*, is a compilation film comprised entirely of found footage — several memorable sequences come from Ophuls’ *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970). According to Eisenberg, the impetus to make the film suddenly occurred when he saw Ophuls’ film:

> As Hitler walked up the steps of La Madeleine I realized that I had stood in that same spot, and read the inscription on the building and sat down there. To consider the fact that during my first trip to Europe, Hitler and I crossed paths in time, really, was a whole metamorphosis of the world in my head; it was a revelation of some kind. Space and time seemed to collapse into one. And I realized, aside from the fact that his political program and history had in fact created my very being, because my parents met in Dachau after the war, there we were crossing paths.

*Displaced Person* is composed of several interrelated fragments that are repeated numerous times in different arrangements and combinations. The fragments are often interspersed with several seconds of black leader. In between, we see Hitler on a train pulling away from a crowded station as the camera tracks a Red Cross nurse racing after the train, two young blond boys on bicycles, a child washing a doll, children playing in a German town, Hitler arriving in Paris, and a formal dance sequence. The reorganization of the arrangements of the sequences serves to redirect and reorient our relation to the sounds and images, thereby uncovering embedded meanings. Furthermore, Eisenberg manipulates the images with the aid of an optical printer. Thus, for instance, in the sequence with the blond boys, sometimes their bicycles move and the background stays still, and
sometimes the opposite occurs. The effect is to arrest history and development: both the personal and the public. The movement of the boys on bicycles across the screen is abruptly interrupted, and that interruption is constantly repeated and replayed. The characters are not allowed to develop: their progress is halted, unnaturally, and their story is left incomplete. The viewer can only speculate and imagine.

A similar manipulation is at play in the train sequence. The camera focuses on a young woman chasing the train, tracking the movement of her body in slow motion. A close-up of her face reveals the degree of sheer ecstasy and fanatical obsession of her devotion to Hitler. As we realize that the footage is taken by one of Hitler’s camera men, the power of the image increases dramatically. The sound track includes Beethoven’s Opus 59, as well as a lecture in English delivered by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss on "The Meeting of Myth and Science." In one of the more poignant points in his lecture, Lévi-Strauss states that “if the same absurdity was bound to reappear over and over again, and another kind of absurdity also to reappear, then there was something which was not absolutely absurd; or else it would not appear.”

Made six years later, *Cooperation of Parts*, as the title suggests, alludes both to Eisenberg’s own sense of fragmentation as it addresses his relationship to the Germany and Poland of his parents as well as to a formal strategy of filmmaking. The film opens with footage taken by Eisenberg at a contemporary European train station (Calais and the Gare de Lyon). However, the voice-over (Eisenberg’s own) paradoxically announces:

> Here is the oldest picture I’ve managed to obtain . . . . It’s a picture of a young woman parting with friends at a railway station in Germany. There’s no platform next to the train (the image on the screen negates this statement) . . . . She’s wearing dark sunglasses. Her hair is long and pinned in back . . . . We know that her two friends would finally arrive in the U.S. sometime in early 1949. So the photograph must be from the summer of 1948. She was trying to convince her own husband to emigrate to the U.S. as well.

By juxtaposing images from 1987 Germany onto a verbal narrative that describes an unseen photo from a Germany of the forties, Eisenberg relates the past to the present, and imbricates, in a manner that recalls the surrealistic methodology of Walter Benjamin, the present with the past through the interplay between the visual and audial registers. But there is more. Indeed, the described photograph of his mother, as well as one of his father taken while in a Soviet Labor camp, also stand as signs for when a visual history of Eisenberg’s family begins. The family is only allowed to be

> Ibid.
perceived visually intact as an image once the war is over — no other visual trace exists. Thus Eisenberg takes on the challenge of creating a personal visual text in which no personal images remain.

During the next forty minutes of *Cooperation of Parts*, Eisenberg’s camera seeks to find traces of the past. This occurs not only in long tracking shots of Auschwitz, Dachau, and the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, but also in the architecture of Berlin. As the camera moves across the architectural landscape, Eisenberg pauses to r eact on images, uttering “True . . . False . . . False . . . True . . . .” For the past is articulated specifically in the traces of mortars, bombings, bullets, and in the ruins of buildings. Needless to say, this is a past not yet glossed over and “reconstructed” for Western eyes. The last shot in this sequence is of the Sacré-Cœur in Paris. Within the flow of images, the effect is startling and brings to our attention how our own conclusions are already embedded in any representation. In the film, Eisenberg also finds the courtyard of the apartment complex in Poland where his mother spent her childhood years. There, he captures young Polish children and an elderly woman who, perhaps because of the harsh economic circumstances in Poland in the 1980s, visually resonate with how characters in the context in which his mother grew up might have appeared forty years ago. Indeed, it is precisely in the former East, where “cosmetic surgery” has not yet been performed to erase all scars of the war, that Eisenberg’s camera finds uncanny markers. These he weaves into the fabric of his memory. As in a traditional essay film, the verbal track is dominated by the reading of philosophical proverbs and aphorisms, some of which are repeated at regular intervals. Importantly, many of these pronouncements are not in any obvious way keyed to the images displayed. Rather, they hang in the silence, unmoored — e.g. “Misfortune makes and breaks you,” “The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass,” and “The longest road is from the mother to the front door.” In the case of the latter, the phrase is first said orally, later it is written and finally it appears as a filmed image of Eisenberg’s mother’s actual front door. The film ends with the following words printed across the screen: “Going down that street ten thousand times in a lifetime . . . or perhaps never at all . . . .”

Ten years later, Eisenberg would once again go “down that street.” To make *Persistence*, he returns to Berlin, and to the camps, drawn now by a reunified Germany. More so than in *Cooperation of Parts*, *Persistence* conveys a sense of the filmmaker as subject. Now, not only is his voice recognizable, but Eisenberg also allows his image to appear on screen. The film opens with a lengthy shot of the angel on top of the Siegessäule, with an effect of wind (representative of history) blowing across its body in an exaggerated fashion. Eisenberg here directly refers with an intertitle to Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* (the angel of history), an image that will serve as the film’s overarching trope of victory and catastrophe. Indeed, the film attempts to show the continuous and discontinuous threads of history. The opening credits announce the title *Persistence*, described as a film in twenty-four absences/presences. The film’s first sequence features extraordinary footage of destroyed, bombed-out Berlin. The footage is remarkable not only because of the proximity of the camera (despite its aerial position), but also because of its use of color stock. This is an utter anomaly. Typically, documentary footage of the War and its aftermath is in black and white. Such
footage provides a necessary distance, placing the events firmly in the past. By contrast, the color footage shocks, bringing the scenes depicted into the present. (The footage was obtained by Eisenberg from the U.S. military, whose propaganda division was given stock of new color film with which to document the success of U.S. Air force raids in 1945.) The next sequence, in black and white, depicts a young boy wandering amidst the rubble and ruins of Berlin. The scene is immediately recognizable. It comes from Rossellini’s famous 1947 film, *Germany Year Zero*, a fictional narrative filmed primarily on location in postwar Berlin. Clearly, this film’s place in film history is one of the central reasons why Eisenberg cites from it. But just as important is the manner in which *Germany Year Zero* mixes the real with the imagined. This culminates in a highly vexed relationship between the personal and the historical.

*Persistence* is primarily about Berlin. The film features an overt curiosity as well as an underlying anxiety regarding the reemergence of Berlin as a capital city. For Eisenberg, Berlin functions as a site that transmits the trauma of the Holocaust. Only in Berlin can the traumatic events of the mid-century be represented and reenacted. The reconstruction of the city today is uncanny, for it visually and audially recalls the rebuilding of Berlin forty years ago. Thematically, many issues resurface that had been buried. Freud wrote in his 1919 essay, “The Uncanny,” that a typical uncanny effect is “produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.”

Eisenberg’s filmic production seems to realize such an imaginary something. His confrontation, however, is with someone else’s reality—a reality that belonged to his parents. Yet, it has persisted in his imagination and has almost become real for him as well. Thus, after visiting the medical experimentation block of Sachsenhausen where his mother was imprisoned, Eisenberg’s voice-over reads a letter he has written to his mother. In the letter he tells her that he does not want to know the details of what she experienced. Complete knowledge is no longer necessary, for it is now felt to be superfluous and obscene. Rather, Eisenberg opts for a filmic strategy marked by absences, focusing instead on what is left unsaid and unrepresented.

Eisenberg’s filmic project creates a history of the intermixing of auditory and visual fragments from the past and the present. These pieces repeat and resurface throughout the film following a musical structure of variations arranged by Eisenberg. This fragmentary incompleteness stands in sharp contrast to the popular, seamless reconstructions available for mass consumption. As Eisenberg explains, “I am very interested in the idea of fragments, and the way fragments are pieced together.” His interest in fragmentation goes beyond an interrupted family history and extends to aesthetic production in general because “it’s been part of art-making and aesthetics for a long time in this century... And fragments sometime have a way of reflecting or breaking things apart.”

But, one might legitimately ask, why film? Why is Eisenberg adamant that this trilogy could only have been conceived and executed in film? Why would the use of video, for instance, have been inconceivable? In part, answers to these questions relate to the fact that the medium of film was...
current during the time period addressed by Eisenberg's cycle. In other words, he seeks a historical veracity that is not mediated by the introduction of a contemporary medium such as videotape. Although Eisenberg's project is a type of historical reconstruction that acknowledges the degree to which it is influenced by the present, he insists on using material (film footage) that has durability and stands as evidence. The footage from German newsreels, from US bombers, from Rossellini's film, and from Eisenberg's own camera, all share a common trait: they are all made in the material form of celluloid. As such, the differences between the film fragments, whether initially intended as documentary or fiction, propaganda or information, designed for private or public consumption, all achieve an equivalence in their status as witness and evidence. As mentioned earlier, Eisenberg's own films will enter into this cycle of history and contribute to these documents. The importance of using film in the 1990s thus achieves another relevance, for it also self-reflexively points to films' passing as a medium of documentation. For if the second World War was witnessed in celluloid, today's wars are documented electronically. Furthermore, the diverse nature of the filmic extracts attests to the amount of work that Eisenberg had to go through in order to find and assemble the footage which he ultimately used. This difficult task is not to be discounted, for it parallels Eisenberg's role as a researcher seeking to uncover and patch together pieces of a hidden history—one whose immediate access has been blocked. Each visit to the archive thus constitutes the meanderings of an essayist who must weave together many different and disparate threads—some of fact and some of fiction.

The traditional editing process was central to Eisenberg's decision to employ the medium of film. Film editing relies heavily on memory—it becomes necessary to keep a whole project in one's head. This is related to the thematics of Eisenberg's films, which, as I have already suggested, are about the construction of history, memory and forgetting. History and memory are necessarily incomplete and full of gaps, lapses, and absences, and Eisenberg's films are marked by these characteristics. Bits of filmic evidence are put together, forming a Benjaminian mosaic where the truth only appears as flashes in the cuts between the fragments. The process resonates with the experience of a subject trying to reconstruct a memory that she did not experience directly. The person is a secondary witness of a trauma, parallel to the experience of a film spectator. The trauma is experienced as what Abraham and Torok have described as “transgenerational memory,” meaning that the trauma has been unconsciously transmitted from one generation to the next. In Cooperation of Parts, Eisenberg's voice-over reveals the resonance of the trauma: “I wind up asking the same question my mother asks, ‘Why me?’ It was thrown on her, not thrown her conscious attention, that these things happened. Like a shock wave felt through several generations.” Her it is important to remember that a trauma can only be recalled indirectly through fetishistic strategies. The fetish in this case resides in the fascination that films and photographs as pieces of evidence from a previous time produce. It is as if, by examining these emblems, we could somehow uncover the truth of what happened. Eisenberg's fetishistic insistence on the filmic medium thus encodes material conditions of displacement, rupture, and loss in the very form of the work.
If there has been a gradual shift in the positioning of the spectator as witness vis-à-vis the historical events depicted, Chris Marker’s CD-ROM project *Immemory* transforms the viewer’s relationship even more dramatically. The piece cannot be accessed without an active and persistent viewer. The CD-ROM positions the participant as a co-writer of history, similar to the protagonist in Marker’s earlier film, *Level 5* (1996), who seeks to uncover a hidden history.

*Immemory* cannot be taken as a pure autobiographical essay any more than can a museum or a library. For although it constitutes Marker’s personal archive, the narrative that is woven, the paths that are followed, and the amount of time spent working with the CD-ROM, are all up to the viewer. Throughout the CD-ROM, the latter is given choices of where to click and what routes to follow. For example, the first screen presents several possibilities: War, Film, Photography, Poetry, Museums, and Voyages. If we choose photography we again have several choices: China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Bosnia, World War II and the like. Click on Cuba and there unfolds (at a speed determined by the viewer) a series of images of Cuba in the thirties. Musical and film extracts can also be accessed. A cartoon cat appears and announces that twenty-seven years have passed, and a newsreel of Fidel Castro giving a speech appears on the monitor. The images are more often accompanied by written texts. Some of these are from literary sources, while others are reproduced telegrams and postcards addressed to Marker.

To navigate through the entire CD-ROM takes hours, and a different voyage is undertaken each time. Thus the history changes each time, depending on where the viewer decides to go. And although the images and texts have been installed by someone else, their ultimate arrangement is left up to the viewer. However, like a deck of cards, after the play is over it is reshuffled and nothing remains of the past game except the viewer’s personal memory of the experience. Heavily indebted to Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, each click produces a madeleine that sends the reader into another long series of meditations.

Marker’s digitalized audio-visual montage thus produces infinite possibilities and results in a work in which the spectator co-directs, edits, and arranges the text. Marker thus pushes the viewer to create new texts rather than to merely consume histories. In turn, the work will always remain open, never complete. For in typical essayistic fashion, the viewer’s role will always-already be that of continuing the work, perpetually constructing new narrative trajectories and creative possibilities.

Essay films have been sporadically produced for at least seventy years. Recently, however, both their theorization and their production have increased to the point where now the essay film or video is commonly acknowledged as a full-fledged peer of the narrative and documentary genres. While film essays were relatively infrequent in the 60s and 70s, this in-between genre proliferated during the 90s. Today, it seems that essay films are everywhere. Indeed, I would even go so far as to argue that Gilles Deleuze’s division of twentieth century cinema into the movement-image (pre-WWII) and the time-image (post-WWII) should be expanded to include the essay film (post the collapse of the
This highly theoretical and self-referential cinema has increasingly come to assume the critical function of the written film theory essay.

I would like to thank Dan Eisenberg for the use of images, Alex Alberro for his insightful and helpful comments on the text, and Ursula Biemann for her persistence.

2 Ibid., p. 7.
3 Ibid., p. 9.
7 Ibid., p. 13. Here we need only recall the audiovisual density of recent productions by Jean-Luc Godard such as Allemagne 90 neuf zéro or Histoire(s) du cinéma.
8 Edward S. Small, Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).
9 Ibid., p. 11.
11 The speech has been published as Ruth Klüger, Dichter und Historiker: Fakten und Fiktionen (Wien: Picus, 2000).
12 Ibid., p. 42.
14 Ibid., p. 198.
16 For an excellent analysis of Syberberg’s film see Anton Kaes, From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
17 “History is something which didn’t take place, told by someone who wasn’t there.”
18 Eisenberg refers to these films as part of a cycle rather than a trilogy. Daniel Eisenberg in conversation with the author (March 22, 2003).
20 Daniel Eisenberg in conversation with the author (March 22, 2003).

25 This methodology is entirely in keeping with Marker’s anti-auteurist manner of working, typified by his tendency to credit himself merely as editor and not as director.

Double Viewing

The Significance of the “Pictorial Turn” to the Critical Use of Visual Media in Video Art

Jan Verwoert

The uninhibited use of found media images and the self-reflexive method of reorganizing and commenting on their meaning places the video essayist often in the position of a media critic, whose position, however, remains ambivalent. It may well be appropriate, therefore, to speak of the “pictorial turn” with respect to critical practices in video art, as media criticism often exhibits a distinctive quality of its own in this context: Even decidedly critical positions do not necessarily distance themselves from the commercial mass media they criticize, but instead settle deliberately in the gray area between art and popular visual culture. Reflection often approaches its object so closely that only minimal distance is preserved between the two. This approach or dinarily takes place within the context of media selection. Many artists work with precisely the same mass-media technologies whose functions are the object of their critical investigations.

The medium of video plays a particularly important role in this process. Video is one of the most popular of all visual technologies. Cameras, recorders and software for video editing on home PCs are now reasonably affordable and easy to use. Television also films on video tape. The use of video surveillance systems is on the rise. Video is one of the most important means of production in our society’s collective visual output. This productive resource is quite freely accessible, and that is a boon to media criticism. Working in the medium of video makes it possible to reconstruct, criticize or correct the logic of image production in a performative mode, from the inside out.

If we are to understand the unique character of these performative practices in theoretical terms, we need to examine a tacit premise of media criticism — namely, that criticism is possible only from a distance. The implication of this assumption is that “critical distance” to the media in question can be achieved only through negation of the fascinating power of popular visual media — and that the loss of distance is tantamount to regression into an attitude of uncritical consumption. Practices which develop critical positions through direct involvement with the media they mean to criticize defy this premise. They demand a redefinition of the relationship between seemingly polar oppositions such as closeness and distance, consumption and criticism, fascination and analysis.

It seems to me that this attempt to redefine the theoretical premises of media criticism — in the sense of critical practice oriented toward a popular visual culture — can now be seen in the current discussion regarding the “pictorial turn.” The purpose of the following essay is to examine several selected aspects of this discussion as sources of ideas for a theoretical outline of the premises of a practical approach to media criticism that investigates the functions
of the medium of video from within the medium of video — and in doing so freely makes use of the
visual languages of popular visual media to examine and correct their functions.

The pictorial turn

In 1992, the American theorist W. J. T. Mitchell published his essay entitled “The Pictorial Turn” in
the journal *ArtForum*.\(^1\) The text has the ring of a manifesto. Mitchell develops the basic principles
of a future scholarly discipline devoted primarily to the study of visual culture. He articulates two
fundamental arguments — one might also call them demands:

First of all, he postulates that in our society, the communication of information, like the exercise
of power, takes place to an increasing extent with the aid of visual technologies. (Nicholas Mirzoeff
describes this situation aptly in the statement “Modern life takes place on screen.”\(^2\)) This trend
toward visualization, Mitchell contends, requires new, appropriate forms of analysis and criticism
of visual phenomena. In this sense, he calls for closer collaboration between social scientists con-
cerned with ideological criticism and scholars concerned with visual phenomena. Surely, no student
of culture with an interdisciplinary orientation would have difficulty supporting such an appeal.

Mitchell’s argumentation becomes bolder at the point at which he demands that the “linguistic
turn” in cultural studies give way to a “pictorial turn.” He criticizes the dominance of a semiotic
approach to interpretation in cultural studies. Under the banner of the “linguistic turn,” models
based upon sign theory and linguistics were not only introduced to cultural studies but also wel-
comed as critical, progressive and avant-garde beginning in the 1970s.

Mitchell does not question the fundamental legitimacy or the critical potential of this approach. His
doubts relate to the question of whether the function and effect of visual media can be described
on the basis of semiotic models. In this sense, then, Mitchell defines the pictorial turn as “a post-
linguistic, post-semiotic rediscovery of the visual image as a complex interplay involving visuality,
apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurativity.”\(^3\)

What I find interesting in Mitchell’s position is not so much the fact that he revives the ontological
question of what pictures are but that he undertakes a re-evaluation of the status of visual media.
Mitchell accuses the advocates of semiotic approaches of “ocular phobia”— a fundamentally icono-
clastic tendency. He finds this underlying tenor reflected in the privileged status of text as opposed
to the visual image; in other words, the image as a medium of mythical obscuration is not merely
set in opposition to the text as a medium of enlightenment but actually subordinated to it. It seems
to me that this blanket devaluation of the visual, this general attitude of scepticism with regard to
visual phenomena is indeed a principal feature of certain forms of criticism based on semiology.
Thus I regard the appeal to accept a “pictorial turn” as entirely reasonable. And there is reason
enough to subject certain ideas about the status of visual media that have quietly established them-
selves as dogmas in cultural-critical thinking in the course of the spread of semiotic approaches to critical reassessment.

Rosalind Krauss’s critique of the pictorial turn

Mitchell’s criticism struck a nerve, as evidenced by the aggressive tone in which the American art journal *October* in an issue devoted to “Visual Culture” expressed its position in opposition to a pictorial turn in 1990. In harsh terms, co-editor Rosalind Krauss defended the semiotic approach in her essay entitled “Welcome to the Cultural Revolution” — citing Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan in support of her arguments. Her reference to precisely these two theoretical pioneers would seem to have been anything but coincidence. Indeed, I think a number of elements in the theories of Barthes and Lacan have solidified into dogmas of cultural discourse or ideological critique that continue to influence contemporary debate — and that it is therefore entirely appropriate to identify these tacit assumptions and criticize them specifically.

On the whole, Krauss’s interpretation of the effect of an image abused for the purpose of ideological manipulation can be described — to use a term coined by W. J. T. Mitchell — as the “Medusa effect.” The image casts a spell over the viewer. It transfixes him, robbing him of all freedom of movement and critical distance. This loss of critical distance makes it impossible for the viewer to see through the mechanisms of manipulation. The semiotic tools with which the image generates its message remain invisible to him. The process of semiosis is obscured from his view. Thus he cannot recognize the image as a constructed, coded sign. Instead, he falsely perceives it as a complete whole and consumes the visual statement as self-evident. In the process, the loss of critical distance prompts the viewer not only to misconstrue his relationship to the image but also to misinterpret his relationship to the real world. Not only does he fail to recognize that the image manipulates him, he also misses the opportunity to establish an active relationship to reality guided by reason. Under the spell of the “Medusa effect,” the viewer takes pleasure in his own passivity and deception as an escape from reality. This escapist pleasure involves elements of regression and compensation. In simplified terms, therefore, the Medusa theorem postulates the transfixation of the viewer and the disappearance of the sign in the moment of pleasure in looking at the image.

Double viewing: the hedonist scepticism of mobile recipients

The alternative theory I would like to sketch out here has its origin in research on recipient behavior conducted within the context of Anglo-American cultural studies. It is the model of a mobile, pleasure-oriented, yet emancipated recipient of the media of popular culture. The models of reception developed in cultural studies are based on the presumption of the multidimensional character of identification and consumption processes. In other words, a consumer of images can have several different, even contradictory attitudes toward the images he consumes. And he is able to identify with multiple, mutually contradictory forms of identification at the same time. How consumers of
visual images subsequently process these images and incorporate them into their personal view of the world cannot be clearly determined in advance. It also seems doubtful that "naive" consumers images still exist in our media society at all. The fact that images can be manipulated is common knowledge today. Anyone who has a computer at home can observe and learn how they are manipulated.

Thus one can and should assume that the consumers of popular visual culture possess a certain degree of basic competence in dealing with media — competence that includes knowledge of the unique laws governing the institutions and the formats of visual media. People know how cinema works and are well acquainted with the standard procedure for news broadcasts — in part because broadcasting companies and film studios provide a constant stream of information about the conditions of production in the form of highly popular "the making-of" features. In light of these insights, the view of the recipients of popular culture as unprejudiced and naive expressed by Rosalind Krauss would seem untenable. To be more precise, they raise serious doubts about her central argument — that visual pleasure necessarily rules out all sensitivity to the "ways in which the significant works" (i.e. the character of the visual representation as a construction, as something made). Indeed, it is obviously true that even sophisticated cinematic illusions not only remain recognizable as illusions but also derive much of their appeal from the fact that they are understood as such. The spectacle advertises itself as spectacle. (Such films as *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* come easily to mind in this context.)

In his study of fan cultures — *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* — cultural scholar Henry Jenkins develops a very convincing model of the complex dynamics that govern the reception of (popular) cultural media. Viewers register the illusory effects created by these media, Jenkins argues, at two levels of perception simultaneously: "Thus one experiences these effects by 'dividing one's credibility', enjoying the mechanics of these illusions while still losing oneself in their narrative implications." At the one level, Jenkins contends, viewers of a television series, for example, take the fiction generated by the medium at face value. They follow the storyline, identify with the protagonists, and become emotionally involved. Yet at a completely different level they enjoy the constructed character of the program, not least of all because it confirms what they already know about the actors and the circumstances surrounding the production of the series. In discussing the relationship of Star-Trek fans to their beloved series, Jenkins writes, "... fans see the fictional characters and their actions as simultaneously 'real' and 'constructed', adopting a strategy of 'double viewing' that treats the show with both suspended disbelief and ironic distance." The concept of "double viewing" thus describes the simultaneity of informed distance and involvement-identification in the reception of visual media. Yet Jenkins does not define this simultaneity as a static balance. He regards reception as a dynamic process in which recipients work out their relationship with what they see actively while they see it. In other words, they assume different atti-
tudes at different times (as Jenkins says, “proximity and distance are not fixed ‘positions’”). The experience of one’s own mental flexibility at the moment of reception makes the process particularly enjoyable. Jenkins sees identification and distancing, belief and disbelief as related attitudes whose interplay constitutes the unique dynamics of the reception process.

Jenkins attributes special significance to the medium of video in this context, as he feels that this medium encourages and supports an approach to visual material that is highly favorable to the playful-masterful form of reception defined as “double-viewing.” Video enables recipients — fans, in Jenkins’s study — to record or borrow and watch movies, programs and series in which they are interested however, whenever and as often as they wish. They can watch certain scenes over and over again, by advancing or rewinding the tape, or skip other ones entirely. They can build their own circulation and communication forms through copying or lending, or they can create video archives of collected tapes based on their own personal criteria. (In this sense, Jenkins argues that the use of video forms fosters both multiple critical “rereading” and “inter textual knowledge.”) All of these practices underscore the material character of video: Video images may not have the aura of film images, but they are more readily accessible for individual use. Video is a very practical material.

Ambivalence as a tool of criticism

The development of a practical approach based upon these assumptions involves advocating an approach to visual media that “complicates” our view of the ways in which these media work, in that it gives productive potential to the ambivalent aspects inherent in the media themselves. In other words, it exploits the contradictions of the media — and thus appeals to the capacity of viewers to adopt different, contradictory attitudes toward what they are viewing during the reception process. An interesting example relevant to this context is offered by videos by Walid Ra’ad, such as *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (from a fictitious series of 53 tapes), which he presents as documentary statements by Souheil Bachar, the lone Arab hostage in a group comprised of himself and five Americans which was held captive under very confining circumstances from 1983 to 1993. All of the Americans write books about their experience during captivity. In formal terms, many of the scenes are reminiscent of videos made by abductors and sent to broadcasting stations to publicize their message: A man sits in an apartment without recognizable features in front of a bare wall and makes a confession-style statement while gazing directly into the camera. Only upon closer examination does it become clear that Ra’ad’s films are fictional. The narrator on the screen is not the hostage. He merely assumes the victim’s position fictitiously in order to play out and mine the various possible ways of telling “victims’ stories” and to emphasize the political nature of their rhetoric. Ra’ad exhibits the mechanisms of the medium in which he works. Yet at the same time he uses the penetrating language and the powerful appeal of the video confession to charge his presentation of the underlying political problems with the intensity of personal experience. Through experimentation with the co-existing, equally legitimate perspectives of belief and disbelief, Ra’ad succeeds in communicating a sense of the problems associated with his subject matter in the
medium of video while exposing the conflicts inherent in the forms in which the medium of video is instrumentalized and questioning the very habits of reception to which his video appeals.

In my view, the production method that corresponds to the form of reception referred to as double viewing is a technique I would call disjunctive synthesis. A method of disjunctive synthesis seeks to make use of the two contradictory principles of fascination and scepticism, exploiting the power of fascination in the images to the maximum at the formal level, taking advantage of the possibilities for establishing coherence through traditional narrative means (voice-overs, continuous flow of images) — thus using all of the tools that contribute to narrative closure and therefore maximize the effect of a work of video art. But this would also mean creating a maximum of heterogeneity at the formal level by combining images with different origins, mixing documentary, staged and computer-generated elements, using special effects and leaving abrupt cuts in place. It would be essential to ensure that moments in which illusion is generated and those that create distance remain related at all times — that neither illusion nor distance is sustained alone. Instead, a continuous alternating shift must take place between illusion and distance. Ultimately, the quality and intensity of the video film is a product of this constant perceptual shift.

**Documentary approaches in the context of art (Finding the Words)**

It is important to establish that videos which do not exploit the medium’s ambivalent qualities for a self-reflexive critique of the media itself are not necessarily deconstructive. And thus video works that employ the tools of “disjunctive synthesis” for constructive purposes are particularly interesting. Anri Sala’s video entitled *Intervista* (1998) is a revealing example of such a work. In *Intervista*, Sala constructs a penetrating biographical narrative and uses it to describe the recent history and the current situation of Albania.

The narrative in *Intervista* proceeds as follows: Sala happens by coincidence upon an old reel of film. The film is a recording of an interview given years ago by Sala’s mother Valdet Sala as a young woman and a spokesperson for the Communist Youth Organization for Albanian television. Her words are not audible. The soundtrack is missing. In search of the lost text, Sala journeys to Tirana, where he succeeds with the help of a deaf lip-reader to reconstruct his mother’s statements. When he confronts his mother with the text of the interview, she reacts with mixed feelings. She is outraged over the ideological tone of her statements but appears incapable of distancing herself from them entirely. That fact that she believed what she was saying at the time of the interview and had invested years of her life in that belief make her former convictions a part of herself, one she cannot and will not deny.

One of the remarkable qualities of *Intervista* is that Sala uses the biographical narrative to expose
the importance of a people's revolutionary movement.
a dimension of experience that is important to an understanding of the past. The relationship between his mother’s biography and the history of the country is symptomatic precisely because it is ambiguous. The contradictory simultaneity of identification and distancing that shapes Valdet Sala’s attitude toward the collective past is characteristic, as *Intervista* shows, of the difficulties encountered by the Albanian people in dealing with the profound upheavals in their society. And Sala maintains the ambiguity at the formal level as well. He counteracts the apparent authenticity of the documentary footage by incorporating staged sequences. Key scenes in the framing narrative, such as the discovery of the film and Sala’s arrival at his parents’ apartment in Tirana, have obviously been re-enacted. Sala moves the film narrative closer to the realm of fiction. Viewed from the perspective of its potential fictional character, the story of *Intervista* becomes a possible rather than a real one. Valdet Sala’s life story takes on the status of a model biography that not only describes a single human destiny but may also be representative of the lives of others.

The simple narrative structure also permits the integration of relatively heterogeneous visual material. The combination of documentary and staged sequences is only one aspect. The artist also embarks upon a number of visual excursions, including scenes of urban life in Tirana filmed by Sala through the windows of a moving automobile. Here and there, the camera shifts abruptly away from a speaking person and focuses on mute building walls or news images on the screen of a television in the background. These interspersed elements play no role at all in the storyline, yet they evoke a palpable impression of the urban, social, and political context in which Sala is operating. Thus Sala uses the resources of “disjunctive synthesis” in several different ways. The personal and the political are presented as interwoven aspects of a whole *in Intervista*, but they are also set apart as incongruent dimensions. On the basis of the same principle, documentary images are combined to form a visual texture which, despite its heterogeneous character, never loses its coherency and, despite its coherence, never loses its heterogeneity.

Thus the aesthetics of *Intervista* reinvigorate the debate on the approaches to the visualization of complex contents in the sense of the “pictorial turn.” The video clearly shows that conventional forms of visualization do not rule out the expression of complexity, heterogeneity, and material quality per se. The video of *ers* proof that traditional means can be used to create coherence and that the fascinating power of penetrating images can be exploited — but also that heterogeneity can also be achieved through montage of visual material of different origins, through the combination of documentary and fictional, of recent and historical found footage, etc. By telling his story but identifying the narrative as a construction (or fiction), Sala succeeds, in the sense of “double viewing,” in drawing upon the principles of fascination and skepticism at the same time.

The detailed analysis of Sala’s video relates to the discussion of the increasing spread of video

works based on documentary approaches in recent years. I see this abundance of documentary videos as a clear sign of a "pictorial turn" in the discourse on art from a social-critical perspective. Until the mid 1990s (one might roughly summarize), the installation was the predominant form used to come to grips with social problems. The installation serves as a display: researched material was distributed in the room, and the installation assumed the character of an archives or a project office, from which interventive action could be initiated. The installation-displays were characterized primarily by a "discursive" aesthetic with anti-visual features: wall newspapers, text anthologies, and reading tables dominated the picture.

In a certain sense, increased interest in documentary video works signifies a shift in the medium and its aesthetics in the essence of unchanged thematic concerns and requirements. The objective is still to address and analyze social problems through research and to present the fruits of that research to viewers. Now, however, the documentary video has assumed the function of the "display" formerly performed by the installation. The aesthetics of naming and instructing have given way to the aesthetics of showing and telling. To speak of a pictorial turn in this context is to point out that forms of representation previously dismissed as unworthy (affirmative and uncritical) are now being used by video artists: penetrating visual imagery and narrative biography.

3 W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn."
5 Mitchell writes, "... to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him into an image for the gaze of the picture [is] what might be called the 'Medusa effect].' —W.J.T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures Really Want?" *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 71–82, here: p. 76.
7 Ibid., p. 66.
8 Ibid., p. 65.
9 The death of Albanian head of state Enver Hoxha in 1985 led to a severe destabilization of the social order. Hoxha had ruled Albania since 1948 on the Stalinist model of a one-party dictatorship and held the country together as an integrating figure. Hoxha’s successor Ramiz Alija was unable to maintain that political course. The first free elections were held in 1991. The political turnaround was accompanied by mass flights of refugees and violent riots. The unrest escalated in 1997 in the wake of the bankruptcy of the country’s largest investment banks and financing companies, which had been the symbols of hopes for prosperity associated with the introduction of a market economy. Large segments of the population lost their entire fortunes. Civil-war style rebellion ensued. The situation eventually calmed but remains tense even today.
10 The theory of the shift from the installation to documentary video in the context of art in the 1990s was proposed by Georg Schöllhammer, who made this observation during a discussion that was part of a series of panel discussions on the art of the 1990s I organized in cooperation with the Kunstverein Hamburg in 2002.
Pioneers of the concept of the installation as material display include such artists and groups as Group Material, Martha Rosler, and Stephen Willats. In the early 1990s, this aesthetic approach moved to the international arena thanks to works by Renée Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Andrea Fraser, and other artists in the “Services” project developed in collaboration with Helmut Draxler. In the German-speaking region, interventionist projects such as the “Wochenklausur” and “BaustopRandstadt” took up the aesthetic. Its echo was heard at documenta X in the form of the so-called “Hybrid Work Space.”
Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves

Walid Ra’ad / The Atlas Group

Excerpt from a public interview with Souheil Bachar conducted by Maha Traboulsi at the American University in Beirut on May 1, 2002. In my presentation, I will try, as much as possible, to remain true to that event.

Maha Traboulsi asks:
Can you please identify yourself?

Souheil Bachar answers:
My name is Souheil Bachar. I am from the village of Houla in South Lebanon. I was kidnapped in 1983. I was released in 1993 after a ten-year captivity. I am 42 years old.

Bachar asks:
Can you identify yourself as well?

Traboulsi answers:
Sure, my name is Maha Traboulsi. I am a media artist and teacher. I also work with The Atlas Group, a foundation I established in 1976 to research the contemporary history of Lebanon.

Traboulsi asks:
Can you tell us about how you came in contact with us, The Atlas Group, and about the tapes you have produced?

Bachar answers:
I saw your presentation in September 1999 at the Aylloul Festival in Beirut. I was very intrigued by your foundation’s mission and by the documents in your archive. I approached you after the presentation, and we agreed to meet and talk. After a series of meetings between us two years ago, you proposed to assist me in the production of videotapes about my experiences as a hostage. Since then, I have produced 53 short videotapes.

Traboulsi asks:
But you don’t make public all 53 videotapes?

Bachar answers:
I have publicly screened all 53 videotapes but only in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Palestine and Morocco. Of the 53 videotapes, I allow only 2 tapes, Tapes #17 and #31, to be screened in North America and Western Europe.
Traboulsi asks:
Why?

Bachar answers:
Well, I should mention that during my ten-year detention, I was held for three months with 5 American men: Terry Anderson, Benjamin Weir, Thomas Sutherland, Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen. My detention with these men coincided with the “Arms for Hostages” negotiations unfolding in the mid-1980’s between the US, Israel and Iran. In fact, my detention with the Americans came to an end on the day that Benjamin Weir was released, on 14 September 1985, as a result of the first arms shipment by the US via Israel to Iran.

I should also state that many of the Western men who were held hostage in Lebanon in the 1980’s have written and published books about their experiences in captivity after their release. In fact, all five American men who were detained with me in 1985 have written books that were published in the US.

In tapes #17 and #31, I wanted to focus specifically on this aspect of my captivity, on my detention with the Americans along with my post-detention study of the writing of the story of captivity. As to why I do not release the other tapes in North America and Western Europe, I am not interested in commenting on this matter.

Furthermore, I would appreciate it if your questions in this interview only deal with what I examine and propose in tapes #17 and #31.

Traboulsi asks:
In tape #17, you state at the beginning that your tapes should be dubbed with a female-voice over in the language of the host country where the tapes are screened... Bachar interrupts:
Excuse me for interrupting, but I think that this is a good time to screen the tapes.

Traboulsi answers:
Yes, let’s do that.

Traboulsi screens tape #17 #31

Traboulsi asks:
Let me return to the question I started to ask.

In tape #17, you state that the tape should be dubbed with a female-voice over in the language of the host country where the tapes are screened. We have just screened the tape in Switzerland and I have seen the tape screened in France and Syria. The female voice-over is always in English. Why?

Bachar answers:
No money was found for the dubbing into German, French and Arabic. As a consequence, I made exceptions until funds are available.
Traboulsi asks:
I also noted that the English voice-over is not an accurate translation of what you say in Arabic. At times, the voice-over says the exact opposite of what you are saying in Arabic and at other times, it says something not related at all to what you are saying in Arabic. Did you translate the text yourself? And if so, why the difference between what you say in Arabic and the non-Arabic voice-over?

Bachar answers:
Yes, I do my own translations.
I have nothing to say about the second part of your question.

Traboulsi asks:
Can you tell how you came to invent yourself, to imagine yourself as Souheil Bachar?

Bachar answers:
As the Arms for Hostages negotiations between the US, Israel and Iran became serious in 1985, Hizballah, Iran’s ally in Lebanon gathered most of the American hostages they held into a single 10X12 foot cell. The idea was that if and when the hostages were released as a result of the arms trade, they would look significantly better than had they just emerged from solitary confinement. During this three-month period of cohabitation, an Arab man was placed in the same room as the Americans.

In their books, Terry Anderson, Benjamin Weir, Thomas Sutherland, Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen identify this man as Wajid or Doumani and they describe him—but they describe him differently. I found these descriptions to be very intriguing and I became interested in this man’s story. After initial attempts to find him proved fruitless, I decided to imagine his testimony. I did so in order to speak about certain dimensions of the “Western Hostage Crisis” that had not been examined at all, namely the cultural and literary dimensions of the writing of the story of captivity; the figurations of Arab and Western masculine identities given expression in the books; and policy dimensions such as a troubling US policy in Lebanon and the Middle East in general.

Traboulsi asks:
OK, then, let me continue with a general question about the political scandal that is most closely associated with the captivity of the Americans in Lebanon in the 1980’s, the Iran-Contra affair.

Walid answers:
It is clear to me that no event framed more publicly the abduction of Westerners in Lebanon than the American scandal widely known as the Iran-Contra affair. I suppose that in the United States, the mention of Iran-Contra conveys up for most people images of Oliver North.

Iran-Contra involved two distinct Reagan Administration policies. The first policy concerned the trading of US arms to Iran for, among other things, the release of US and other Western hostages held in Lebanon by Iran’s proxy militias in Beirut. The sales did in fact lead to the release of American hostages Benjamin Weir in 1985 and Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen in 1986. It is important to note that this initiative contradicted the publicly stated US policy “never to negotiate with states that sponsor terrorism;” Iran had been officially designated a sponsor of terrorism in January 1984.
The second policy involved the support of Contra military and paramilitary activities in Nicaragua between 1984 and 1986. The legality of this policy was also challenged in Congress and the press particularly in relation to the provisions of the First and Second Boland Amendments of 1982 and 1984.

What was taking place was that the US was overcharging the Iranians to the tune of 600% for the sales, and diverting the profits to support the Contras in Nicaragua. When this diversion scheme was revealed, it triggered a series of official investigations, 5 of them in fact between 1986 and 1993, beginning with US Attorney General Meese’s Preliminary Inquiry into The Sale of Arms to Iran and concluding with Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh’s report in 1993.

My reading of the investigations demonstrated to me that their investigative scope was limited to particular areas and as such failed to address a number of central questions about the development and implementation of US foreign policy. I am convinced that a bringing together of the facts was far from the sole or even the primary motive of these investigations.

The investigations were politicized and partial, and they produced contested narratives that displaced interest away from the historical and policy dimensions of the affair and onto a concentrated celebration of the good health of the American political system. As such, the investigations failed to shed light on how a disastrous US policy in the region had contributed to the abduction of Western men in Lebanon.

Now some may think that this scandal is old news. Well, it is and it isn’t. It is important to keep in mind that many of the American policy makers who were involved in this affair in the 1980’s, men such as Elliot Abrams, Otto Reich and John Negroponte, some of whom had been convicted and sentenced, are now once again active in shaping and implementing current US policy in the Bush Administration, and their continued involvement in shaping a disastrous US foreign policy was evidenced a few weeks ago when their role in the attempted coup in Venezuela was uncovered.

Traboulsi asks:
I get the sense from one segment in your tape, the one where you discuss how each American hostage begins his story by talking about the weather, that you are making a point about how the Americans were also de-politicizing their abduction in their books, that they were treating their kidnappings in personal rather than political terms. Is this right?

Bachar answers:
Yes, that’s correct.
From the books written by the Americans and in my discussions with them in captivity, it is clear to me that they were all to some extent aware that their abduction was a political rather than a criminal or personal matter.

This political and historical dimension was also acknowledged by the families of the hostages who were dealing with the White House and the State Department during the detention of their loved ones. Carol Weir (Benjamin Weir’s wife) has written about her meeting with then Secretary of State George Shultz and about how she had argued that “It should be recognized that they (the Shi’a of Lebanon) had some legitimate grievances against the United States.” She wrote of the oppressive...
US-supported Israeli aggressions in South Lebanon as emblematic of the United States’ “lack of concern for justice in the area”: Americans didn’t seem to understand why there is so much rage against us in the countries of the Middle East . . . . The United States had supplied the Israelis with cluster bombs, vacuum bombs, and weapons of every kind. American bombs by air and American shells by sea were raining on the city of Beirut. The civilian population was on the verge of panic. Unfortunately, Secretary of State George Shultz was more intent on dismissing and discarding the captors than on engaging in any kind of dialogue with them as is evident from his response to Carol Weir that “the Shiites . . . are pagan and primitive people,” and that “such people were crazy, they heard voices from God, they were deranged. It was impossible to talk to them.”

Now I will not discuss the question of whether Hizballah was “a mark of shame upon the Lebanese Shiite community they purported to represent.” On this matter, I proceed with the understanding that the captors and their actions were at times despised and at times held in high esteem for various reasons by Lebanese and Westerners alike.

Traboulsi asks:
Can you tell us something about your insistence on having your voice dubbed by a female voice-over?

Bachar answers:
A fascinating and revealing aspect of books written by the Americans is that of the literary contributions of the hostages’ girlfriends and wives. Anderson’s, Sutherland’s, and Weir’s books, for example, include sections in which Madeleine Anderson, Jean Sutherland and Carol Weir contribute by relating “their side of the story.”

In many reviews of the books in the US popular press, I was surprised that critics have characterized the contributions of the wives as “odd” and as “distracting.”

The question I want to ask these critics is: From what does Madeleine’s or Carol’s account divert us to deserve this characterization as a “distraction”?

It is evident when reading the captivity memoirs that what was unfolding in Beirut was a series of events from which the wives were excluded. Beirut’s cells, in other words, were spaces populated mainly by men, by Arab and Western men. So, one can say that the wives’ contributions constitute a gendered distraction in that they impose onto an otherwise male narrative of captivity a woman’s thoughts and perspective.

However, it is noteworthy that Madeleine’s account was not the only one written by a woman close to Terry Anderson. Terry’s sister, Peggy Say, had for years been vocal in the popular press about her brother’s fate. Her book titled Forgotten was published during her brother’s absence in 1987.

By 1993 when Terry Anderson’s book was published, Peggy Say’s book was out of print and she was out of sight.

Souheil Bachar was kidnapped in Beirut (Lebanon) in 1983. He was in solitary confinement for ten years except for 27 weeks in 1985 when he was held in the same cell with Americans Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobsen.
What I want to argue is that while the captivity of Westerners in Lebanon affected not only the hostages but also their families, friends, governments, and numerous others, it is intriguing that the story of captivity is distilled in the memoirs to being not that of the Western men and their mothers, fathers, brothers, friends, or sisters, but particularly that of the hostages and their wives/girlfriends.

The distillation of the narrative in its published form suggests that Madeleine and the wives/girlfriends’ contributions constitute not only gendered contributions but also sexualized ones. Some writers have already suggested that the drama of Western women’s captivity tends to revolve around their sexual assault. I want to suggest that of Western men’s revolves around containing the threat of sexual desire for men, for Arab and Western men. This threat is ultimately contained through the literary contributions of the wives/girlfriends.

These contributions not only confirm the women’s self-imposed celibacy during their husbands’ ordeal. Their contributions also confirm that women remain the Westerners’ love objects. Hence, Bachar’s uses of a woman’s voice-over works in relation to his segment on sexuality. Both segments are to remind us of the gendered, homosocial and homoerotic dimensions of the captivity of Westerners in Lebanon, and to suggest that the wives’ contributions demonstrate that the experience of captivity and its representations grant the male hostage a better understanding not only of “the enemy, God, the family, or self,” but also of his sexuality. It confirms his heterosexuality.

Traboulsi asks:
Some may wonder whether you are ridiculing the American hostages. What happened to all these men, be they American, British, or Arab, was horrible, tragic? Don’t you agree?

Bachar answers:
Yes, of course I agree.

The books written by the Americans relate a remarkably sobering account, and stand as a fascinating testimony to our horrible ordeal in Lebanon during those years. Abducted and confined in detention centers, “dungeons,” cells, and prisons, we all endured situations of extreme physical and psychological abuse. Beaten and blindfolded, gagged and taped, harangued, threatened, tormented, isolated, abandoned, half-starved, chained, ridiculed and harassed, we suffered greatly at the hands of our captors. And some of us continue to suffer the physical and psychological effects of our detention.

My interest today is in how this kind of experience can be documented and represented. I am also convinced that the Americans have failed miserably in this regard but that in their failure they have revealed much to us about the possibilities and limits of representing the experience of captivity.

What I want to ask is: Of all the ways the stories of captivity could have been written, why were they written this way?

I should also note that the representation of the experience of captivity is by no means foreign to American readers. In fact, captivity narratives are “the only literary-mythological form indigenous to North America.”

\[2\]
My hypothesis then is that the captivity of the Americans in Lebanon is fundamentally a story to be told, written, and filmed, and inevitably has been told, written, and filmed. And the written stories we ended up with are familiar stories, ones that, it seems, need to be repeated.

Here, I am referring, first to a general recognizable structure of what is called the "captivity narrative," a structure that can be detected in the various accounts; and second, to the fact that Anderson, Weir, and Jacobsen, who have all written and published books about their experiences in Lebanon, also spent a significant part of their time in captivity together, in the same room. In other words, the chronology of events for Anderson, Weir, and Sutherland, Jenco, and Jacobsen is more or less the same. The same is true of Keenan and McCarthy, who have both written and published their captivity memoirs and who spent most of their detention together.

This proliferation of captivity accounts that detail the experiences of men who had spent most of their captivity in the same place, around the same time, and under very similar conditions is intriguing. Commenting on this matter, one hostage remarked that this multiplicity of books proves that "each man experienced his imprisonment in his own way." This remark highlights a particularly familiar tendency in the captivity memoirs whereby the experience of captivity is represented primarily as a psychological and individual rather than a social or political phenomenon.

This move away from the socio-political is produced at the beginning of each of the narratives as I suggested in the videotape. All the books begin similarly by describing the moment or day of abduction. Jacobsen, Weir, Ciccipio, Waite, and Anderson respectively begin their accounts with the following passages:

May 28, 1985 was a typical Beirut morning, swiftly brightening as the sun burned off the early morning mist. (Jacobsen)

The morning of May 8, 1984, blended beauty with harshness. On that bright spring day in the Muslim section of the city, the sounds of birds coming from the untended garden plot next to our apartment building contrasted with the angry growl of distant explosions. (Weir)

I don’t think there was a happier man in the world than I was on the morning of September 12, 1986. (Ciccipio)

Beirut, 20 February 1987

When I awoke, it was dusk. For a moment I lay still slowly, reluctantly returning to the conscious world. It was unusually quiet. A gentle breeze stirred the faded hotel curtains, bringing with it a hint of sea. (Waite)

The emphasis in these beginnings on detailing the subjective perceptions of meteorological conditions in the city or the psychological state of mind of the hostage-to-be comes at the expense of some clarification of the socio-political context of Lebanon. By bracketing the very day, the very moment of their abduction from the socio-political context, the incident of captivity...
too, as an accident. The presence of Westerners in Beirut during the mid-1980’s is assumed to have no unusual significance, and Beirut is presented as any other city in the world, except for the “angry growl of distant explosions.”

A crucial shift is effected as the abductions are described in these terms. The shift is from the social and political toward the personal and psychological aspects of detention.

Traboulsi states:
Thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

Bachar replies:
And thank you for your generous questions.

A longer version of this interview was published in German in Springerin 2 (2002).

1 The Atlas Group is a project established by Walid Ra’ad in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon. One of our aims with this project is to locate, preserve, study, and produce audio, visual, literary and other artifacts that shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon. In this endeavor, the group produced and found several documents including notebooks, films, videotapes, photographs and other objects and organized these works in The Atlas Group Archive. The project’s public forms include mixed-media installations, single channel screenings, visual and literary essays, and lectures/performances.


The Empty Center

Hito Steyerl

"It is not so much crossing boundaries as frontiers as it is the partial disappearance, dissolution or repositioning of the boundaries themselves. It is the shifting of the boundaries as you try to cross them ... Now you begin to see that we are also talking about the fragmentation of boundaries; the partial breakdown, renegotiation, repositioning of boundaries, about the appearance of new boundaries which cut across the old ones.” — Stuart Hall

Potsdamer Platz is a square in the center of Berlin, Germany. Before World War II, it used to be the center of the city, the center of its power. Then it became a deadly minefield, enclosed between the borders of the Cold War. In 1989, the Berlin Wall comes down. The area between the walls, the empty margins of the border, is open. Now, the center returns.

After German reunification, Potsdamer Platz is rebuilt by transnational companies. In the process, people are shoved out to the outskirts of the city. They are marginalized by the recentering of Germany’s political and economic power. The Empty Center closely follows the processes of urban restructuring that have taken place in the core of Berlin over the last eight years. In 1990, squatters proclaim a socialist republic on the death strip. Eight years later, the new headquarters of Mercedes Benz arise in the same location.

The film makes use of slow superimpositions to uncover the architectural and political changes of the last eight years. It focuses on Potsdamer Platz to discover traces of global power shifts and the simultaneous dismantling and reconstruction of borders. At the same time, it traces back the history of ostracism and exclusion, especially against immigrants and minorities, which always have served to define the notion of a powerful national center. Its form evokes an archeology of amnesia where every single item refers to absence and erasure. What is uncovered is a repeated process of obliteration.

Postcolonial histories

The history of minorities in Germany before World War II often provokes bewilderment. Neither the labor migration nor the refugee movements after World War I have left traces in the collective historical awareness. Migration movements in the wake of German colonialism and the traces of anti-
colonial activities in the Weimar republic are even more unknown. Only the existence of Jewish minorities is acknowledged to a certain degree. This form of historiography is not overly surprising. Walter Benjamin wrote that history is always a construction of the powerful.

The neglect of minorities in this kind of historiography derives partially from its formal characteristics in that such historiographies form a grid of knowledge which structurally excludes minorities. Minorities are not primarily defined by their small number, but by their incompatibility with pre-existing categories of identity. This is due to the construction of minority, which involves a maze of conflicting demands. Minority is constructed in between its own conceptions and those of the majority. Since these two conceptions are not congruent, the process always produces loose ends. Yet it is not this residue which is constitutive of the situation of minority but rather the often arbitrary and intense swaying of the categories within which the ever changing construction and classification of minority takes place. In this border zone, the norms of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion are being negotiated, as well as the allocation of humans to all areas of political existence or to the zone of “naked life,” which is completely disenfranchised and stripped of rights.

The border space is where the rules are made through exception, and this exception is often identified as minority.

In the film *The Empty Center*, the border space is determined as the empty zone between the walls of the former death strip, the area of the Berlin Wall in the center of Berlin. In the empty expanse between the borders, where empires confronted each other, the competing power claims of nation and capital have consolidated into architectural forms. But in the same space, lost traces of colonial and minority presence can be retrieved as well. This search is not informed by feelings of nostalgia but by a desire to understand how the process of erasure is inscribed into the very foundations of the constructions of power. This space of the border is the dark side of the euphoric poststructuralist concepts of hybridity, carnival and fluid nomadism.

Two types of spaces are intersecting and superimposing here: the political one, which allows for social participation, and the one connected to a state of exception, in which different kinds of minorities are threatened, flexibilized and disenfranchised. These two types of spaces penetrate each other to such a degree that practically in every political space, the state of exception is co-present. This is particularly relevant to minorities, who are often equated with the state of exception.

**Zone of indeterminacy**

The video *The Empty Center* analyses the former border zone between the walls in its relation to the state of exception. In this area the symbols of the new political and economic powers arise over a period of 10 years: government buildings and company headquarters. The new powers are consolidated during a period of transition within this undetermined zone between the former borders. In this place, history is written and history is erased. The video probes different construction sites.
to unsettle the myth of “tabula rasa,” of an empty spot without historical depth, which informs all new building activities.

In the 90s, on the former premises of the Palais Mendelssohn, former residence of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, a Jamaican woman is selling pieces of the Berlin wall and GDR transit visa in a souvenir tent. Her own residence permit is only temporary. The souvenir tent was removed and a large new building has been erected.

Reconstruction plans for the area of the former chancellery of the Reich were highly controversial. In the 30s, the building was reconstructed by the Nazi government as their headquarters. This structure included the famous Führerbunker, where Hitler and Goebbels committed suicide in 1945. But the building had been in use before the Nazi period.

In Bismarck’s times the so-called Congo Conference was held here. A genocidal private colony by the name of Congo State owned by the Belgian King Leopold as private property was legitimated. At that time, arbitrary borders were drawn across a five meter high map of Africa. They became commonly known as “Berlin Borders.” After German reunification, the adjacent subway station, which integrates parts of the former chancellor’s marble decoration, is renamed from “Thaelmannplätz” into “Möhrenstraße” (Thaelmann was a former communist leader, whereas Möhr str eet refers to black musicians in the Prussian King’s army).

May Ayim comments on this act as an erasure of antifascist memory in favor of sentimental colonial reminiscences, as an act which is symptomatic for the rising racist resentments articulated in many acts of violence against foreigners and people of color in the Berlin of the 90s. While a part of the area has been reconstructed during the GDR period as a residential area, another part is now supposed to be used for the premises of the Federal states mission buildings. The debate becomes heated over the third part of the area, where a memorial for the murder of European Jews is planned. In 2000, neo-nazis repeatedly marching on the site in order to protest against the building of the memorial.

The newly built Sony headquarters on Potsdamer Platz include the old Hotel Esplanade. In 1940, the “Indische Legion” (Indian Legion) is celebrating the Indian day of independence there. It formed a part of the Waffen-SS, is led by the nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose and was largely recruited among British POW’s from the Indian subcontinent. The German government had supported anti-English opposition among Indians since World War I and financed part of Indian political diasporic activities in Germany. These contacts laid the groundwork for Bose’s later activities.

The history of the Indian Legion is one among many stories of non-German troops which actively supported fascist rule and aggression. Besides the Indian Legion there was an Arab Legion, a Bosnian and Albanian Legion and other troops from most occupied countries. The multicultural his-
tory of the Waffen-SS refers to a history of partly nationalist, partly anticolonial movements who tried to realize their anticommunist, anti-Western and often racist and anti-Semitic goals in joining forces with German Nazis and Japanese militarists. But Berlin was also the scene of early anti-colonial communist inter-nationalism. Zhou Enlai, later head of state of liberated China, and M. N. Roy, secretary of Comintern, both spent time in Berlin working in diasporic and inter-nationalist communist circles.

Most interesting is the connection of the sceneries of Weimar Republic commercial exoticism with the deportation camps of the early 20s, enacted on the legal base of the state of emergency. The area of the new building of A+T company was taken by a building called “Haus Vaterland” (house fatherland). It housed a Japanese tea room, a Turkish coffee shop, a Spanish Bodega, a Russian vodka pub, a Wild West bar, a French bistro, a palm tree hall and the so-called Rhine terrace. The architect and critic Siegfried Kracauer has analyzed the building as a symptom of a depoliticized employment culture obsessed with efficiency and hygiene. He meticulously notes the praises of the various attractions in the advertisement brochure of Haus Vaterland: “Bavarian landscape, Zugspitze with Eibsee, alpenglow, dance of Bavarian Boys, prairie landscapes at the big lakes, Arizona Ranch with cowboy songs and dances, Negro-Cowboy-jazzband.” Rationalized escapism is central to the architectural constitution of the building itself: embodied in the convolution of facades and stage scenery, whose geography is taken “from popular songs”. The former Askari soldier Bayume Mohammed Hussein is working here as a waiter. He lost his German citizenship in 1933. He died at the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, where he was deported in 1943 because of “racial disgrace.”

The earliest “concentration camps” in Germany were opened shortly after World War I. They were called “concentration camp for foreigners” and served as internment camps for refugees who could not be deported to their countries of origin. Their inmates were mostly Eastern European Jews, but also Latin Americans, Asians and suspected Communists of all nations. Although the camps were called “concentration camps,” they did not implement anything even remotely resembling the later extermination policies of the concentration camps of the National Socialist period. The main connection between both types of concentration camps is a legal one. Both were legally based on laws relating to the state of emergency. This state of emergency was proclaimed several times during the Weimar republic and became perment during the Nazi period. The state of emergency means a suspension of rules and the chaotic creation of new, arbitrary rules — the rule of for ece — at the expense of those minorities defined as exceptions.

Time lags

The formal structure of the video is a recreation of the structure of the former border zone between the walls. Long superimpositions show the transformation and reconstruction of single buildings within a period of five years. Just as the legal framework and the structures of transition materia-
lize in the area between the former walls, transition formally becomes visible between two images which show the same place at different times and document its architectural transition. There is always one part of the picture which remains the same while everything else changes. The reflection on repetition and difference became the formal backbone of the film. In a wider sense, these transitions refer to the question of repetition and difference within history. Does the past repeat itself? Do parts of it return while the rest changes? Does it return with a difference? Or does it return as something else? How can we relate the different patterns of exclusion and nation-building in German history? Is it possible to relate the colonial policies of the Bismarck area to the present treatment of foreigners and minorities in Germany? Wouldn’t this type of relation between different types of exclusion infer a relativist stance towards the genocide during the Nazi period? On which basis can we position these different historical periods in relation to one another?

In this sense, the video essay is a document of a period of transition — also on the level of visual production modes. It documents the technological transition from celluloid to digital processing technologies. All images were either shot in HI-8 video or 16-mm film — but the postproduction was entirely performed on nonlinear editing systems, which enabled me to visualize the process of excavation and of the visualization of different layers of the terrain. By incorporating not only different strata of history of the place but layers of different technologies as well, the video turns into an experimental project of a political archeology.

Translated by John Southard

Sky’s the Limit

Eric Cazdyn

Sky’s the Limit theorizes—by way of its own formal strategies—the God-term of our current historical moment: globalization. Departing from the counter-globalization demonstrations over the FTAA meeting in Quebec City, the video is organized in three sections. The first part, entitled “Four Stories,” turns on four prose poems, each relating to a different concept of globalization (representation, possibility, participation, and performance). In between the rolling text of these poems are image-sets ranging from individual demonstrators to the launching of tear gas canisters, from assorted political signage to George Bush and Jean Chretien condemning dissent. Part two, entitled “Found Footage,” focuses on an interview between the CBC and Sinclair Stevens, a former Mulroney Cabinet minister. The interview, right in front of the infamous fence (separating the leaders from the demonstrators) illustrates both the vast differences and peculiar similarities between the dominant political and media representatives (Stevens and the CBS) and the marginal demonstrators and alternative media.

In the final part, entitled “The Parallax View,” the frame is split into four quadrants, in which the first four poems are visually represented (an Alexander Kluge film clip, a Lenny Bruce performance, a quote from a Nam Jun Paik film, and clips from Japanese pirate television). Over this split screen a narrator ties together the videos themes in a form that sits somewhere between political discourse and poetic echo chamber. The voice-over reads as follows:

Globalization is the God-term of the day. It’s been a long time since such a term caught the imagination, cranked up the zeal of so many divergent voices, from the corporate executive to the humanities professor, from the poet to the person on the street. Give me the last time you remember a category so glibly used? If we’ve learned anything from the past it’s that the moment people start speaking the same language it’s time to leave town. But to where? If we end up in Africa, odds are we’ll come face-to-face with one of the sixty million who are HIV positive, a symptom of, you win, globalization. If we go to that secret place in the country, we’ll encounter farmers fighting for or against free trade. Or forget the town where we’ll end up, it’s the leaving part that already implicates us into the globalization complex: by car, by plane, by our sub-contracted shoes. So if we can’t leave town, then the only choice left is to go to town, or in this case to the old city, to Quebec City.

Thirty-four heads of state, 75,000 demonstrators, 5,000 riot police, 3,709 tear gas canisters, 502 plastic bullets and one four kilometer long spite fence straight out of a Jack Conroy short story. Why are we her e? Do we really think the opera will end differently? Lucky for us, the concept of
possibility exceeds the tried logic of victory and defeat. Possibility might be forgotten, buried under
ground, but it can’t be extinguished. Alexander Kluge shows us this in a crystal, in a conversation
between a man and a woman (and yes, I reversed their roles). We are there to perform for ourselves, to make our own signs, shoot our own films. Like Lenny Bruce, we must perform our own act, right there on the streets, or else we’re destined to watch the media blowhards do it for us.

There is a sliver of difference between doing and knowing. Does this make a fetish out of participation? Maybe. But isn’t this whole event and what happened in Seattle and Prague and Okinawa and Gothenburg and Genoa and back to ground zero in Chiapas about democracy, about a certain breakdown in democracy, in representational democracy? To act politically means watching the white rectangle, feeling my sore back, struggling with my desire to treat film like video and hit eject. But representation is also an aesthetic category, and the breakdown in representation, in the relation between the artwork at hand and the world itself, is once again in question. Isn’t this what the Japanese television anecdote spells out for us in the face of impossibility, we must participate in the performance so as to break open a whole new space of representation and thus a whole new space of possibility.

Speaking about this most recent crisis in representation, let’s turn to the case of Sinclair Stevens. Stevens, an old Mulroney yes-man, was someone who even the Mulroney government had to cut loose due to a number of embarrassing episodes. In Quebec, Stevens found himself on the wrong side of the fence; not only was he gassed, but, alas, (and however disingenuously) disabused as to the repressive nature of the state.

Yes, of course, this is partisan politics par excellence; an opportunity for Stevens to take pot shots at Jean Chrétien. Still, what’s interesting here is how Stevens chants the anti-globalization mantra, from the rise in power of transnational corporations to the destruction of the environment, from the loss of national sovereignty to the criminalization of dissent. How can Stevens, a rather slow-witted conservative, slip so easily into the language of the Other? Or to come at this from the other direction: does the possibility exist to criticize the current trends of globalization without speaking the same language as the xenophobes, ultra-nationalists and Luddites of one’s own national situation? At the present moment there seems to be no available language to solve this problem; it’s something like an eyeless needle that can only be threaded by radical changes in the social situation. Only after globalization processes come into greater relief, only after national identities weaken even more, will an effective language emerge to thread this particular needle.

It’s where I see what happened on the streets of Quebec as suggesting new forms of representation. Perhaps for ms that are impossible to realize at the present time — a trembling of new democratic forms for ms. But, clearly, what is most interesting about the Sinclair Stevens interview is not his opportunism or even his golden grab-bag reference to Marx, but the transparent tone of Don Newman (his CBC interlocutor) and the various people who walk in and out of the camera frame.
Newman, who believes violence always starts on the Left, couldn’t hide his contempt, his hatred for the hooligans, for the sure, dramatic tilt of a woman’s head as she fights the sting of pepper spray; for the hooded guy with cigarette in hand who gave his lover their only gas-mask. But who are these people? The middle-class? The privileged? Spoiled kids who yearn deep down for daddy’s strong slap on the wrist? Yes, they were there. But who can blame them? Yes, the crowd is overwhelmingly white—just one image of Gay Pride in Toronto, filmed two months later, confirms this. So what will it take? I don’t know. But it’s here where the words of my immovably luminous friend Masao Miyoshi sound: “as the planet goes so goes social division.” Meaning, as we destroy the planet more and more we will be forced to live more and more with and as the other. And then, only then... sky’s the limit.
"but I don't want to talk about that"

Postcolonial and Black Diaspora Histories in Video Art

Rinaldo Walcott

Is there a postcolonial visual culture? What does it look like? What is it engaged with? What does it have to say? And if there is a postcolonial visual culture what does its eye see? What is its gaze? What might viewers see? What does it demand from our looking, our eye? The rhetoric of these questions structure what it is I want to suggest in this essay. I want to suggest a postcolonial way of seeing. In particular, I want to suggest a postcolonial filmic art of seeing that affirms, negates and repositions sightlines and gazes so that another and other stories of modernity and postmodernity are revealed. The postcolonial form of seeing is a radical envisioning and revising of modernity. This confrontation with modernity both disrupts and reconstructs modernity, revealing in the process the others of modernity and other modernities. My purpose in this essay is to demonstrate the ways in which the film and video art of Isaac Julien, but more specifically The Attendant (1993) and Dana Inkster's Welcome to Africville (1999), narrate visual stories of black modernity which speak back to and speak within "the Modern" as a moment of both interruption and a new articulation of other modernities. This interruption and new articulation is positioned within the context of recognizable moments of historical events—in this case slavery, HIV/AIDS and the racist demolition of a historic black Canadian community. The historical is invoked by these artists in their video essays as a shorthand movement or compression that speaks back and forward simultaneously to open a new arena of historical and present-future contexts for locating a more ethical gaze and sightline. A different view of the modern. Thus we might ask: what are the optics of the postcolonial? What constitutes its scopic drive? How might we think about its scopic drives both within and beyond the contexts of colonialism, imperialism and decolonization, and this time that we might characterize as the postcolonial condition?

In When Was "The Post-colonial"?: Thinking at The Limit, Stuart Hall attempts to clear some conceptual ground for thinking about the use of the term postcolonial in a manner that allows us to move on from the debates concerning its usefulness as a term. He writes: "What the concept may help us to do is to describe or characterise the shift in global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the age of Empires to the post-independence or post-decolonisation moment. It may also help us (though here its value is more gestural) to identify what are the new relations and dispositions of power which are emerging in the new conjecture." Hall’s insistence on marking a condition of postcoloniality is important because he both identifies and diagnoses the conditions of its creation and the articulation of the video art that I shall make mention of. Hall argues that what decolonization as a practice made evident and visible was that it directed our attention to the many ways in which colonisation was never simply external to societies of the impe-
rial metropolis. It was always deeply inscribed within them — as it became indelibly inscribed in the cultures of the colonised.” Hall comes to call the relation of the inside/outside the “double inscription.” The works of Isaac Julien and Dana Inkster are marked with a double inscription which speaks to the complexities and complications of the conditions of late modernity that engulf us all, even if unevenly. The video art discussed in this essay articulates a “new humanism” which re-fashion and re-articulates modernity anew. But to access this new humanism, a “deciphering practice” has to be engaged.

A deciphering practice is a mode of reading, but in this case the reading is also seeing. In particular it is a mode of reading/seeing in the context and the time of the postcolonial condition when readers, or in this case viewers, must decipher what the video/texts are intended to do. Sylvia Wynter has articulated and developed the notion of a deciphering practice for viewing/reading the archipelago of poverty — the Caribbean. Wynter suggests that “[u]nlike a critical practice which must seek for the meanings of the text in the text alone . . . a deciphering practice will seek to function correlatively at four levels.”

These four levels are complex and interrelated: 1) the signifying practices of the text itself must be accounted for; 2) the specific social environment or cultural dimension of the text as its performative complex of meaning produce a “symbol-matter information system” that is structured by the behaviour-regulating code that brings it into being as such an environment/dimension; 3) the third level brings the results of level one and level two together. This is important because this third level requires us to consider what the performative and representational signifying practices of the text or its meanings are “intended to do— that is, what collective behaviours they are intended to induce and how precisely the signification practice” provide ways to shift, alter and/or retain the status quo of our habits; and 4) the place from which we might constitute the beginning of a critique of present conceptions of the Human and move towards a rethinking of what it means to be Human (a new humanism) or to constitute what Wynter calls “new forms of human life.” What Wynter offers in her complex argument for a deciphering practice is a challenge to think beyond current conceptions of the Human and its order/containment/regulating “metaphysico-epistemological” emises. It is in this regard that I will offer some analysis of Julien’s and Inkster’s video art as new por tals into the realm of a radical and more ethical modernity. But a deciphering practice also suggests something else. It suggests that modernity has to be read and re-read or viewed and reviewed in these works in terms of what lies beyond the text of the visual. This video art intends to do something. Thus these films ask viewers to engage them beyond the immediacy of the visual presentation. These videos engage in a conversation concerning the unfinished business of modernity, that is the business of liberation and freedom especially for black diaspora peoples and other subaltern ns.

Furthermore, a deciphering practice means that neither the diasporic nor the postcolonial condition is static and knowable, but that each condition requires a viewing/reading practice to make it intelligible in its various moments and conditions of appearance and utterance. What this means is that we must decipher the politics of our present moment uncovering histories of desires, antagonisms,
transcultural moments, conversations and dialogues, from which a fuller picture of the modern and postmodern might be derived. Sufficient to say that both Julien’s and Inkster’s work falls within some of the recognizable conditions and tropes of the postcolonial moment as exemplary of our time. The most recognizable aspect of their video art is their play with and rewriting of the grand narratives of the history of modernity and the history of black communities. By so doing their video art rewrites, interrupts and renarrates nation, citizenship and community.

Viewing/reading the postcolonial video essay

Julien’s *The Attendant* is a text that grapples with the ways in which history might be usable in the context of black life in a post-slavery world. Working across a range of concerns, the text takes up the politics of desire, S/M practices and cross-racial attraction, desire and sex all within the context of the pandemic HIV/AIDS. Importantly the action takes place in a museum below the painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* (circa 1833) by François-Auguste Biard (1798–1882). Dialoguing with Biard’s anti-slavery painting, housed in the Wilber force Museum (Wilber force being a famous anti-slavery activist), Julien constructs what he calls “tableaux vivants” which reposition inter-racial desires and sexual fantasies in the postcolonial and postmodern period as a site for multiple questions.  

How might black queer men enjoy the pleasures of S/M? Is it possible to re-signify the whip and chains of slavery? Such questions become important in light of the kinds of limits and possibilities S/M offers as HIV/AIDS opens up both limits and possibilities concerning bodies, their boundaries and our sexual pleasures and practices. Thus *The Attendant* unsentimentally, but rigorously engages the ways in which history and the things of its very constitution might be re-signified across new times and new conditions.

Julien’s accomplishment in *The Attendant* is an engagement with the history of transatlantic slavery and the ways in which its signification can both work in the service of a liberatory politics and as a confining, restrictive black nationalist politics. How can a black queer enjoy S/M practice? What does it mean when a black queer enjoys S/M practice? He attempts to negotiate between the two. In fact, *The Attendant* posed the question of what is the place of parody for black queer bodies within the iconography of both slavery and, importantly, the practices of contemporary S/M pleasures? Such a concern brings to the fore the usefulness of history and the ways in which the archeology of knowledge can, quite simply, open up other questions — desires, fantasies, pleasures, fears — in short, an unspoken erotic economy not for enclosed by the pressures of a black closet, nor confined to a restrictive history incapable of re-signification, is compressed in the video and requires deciphering to make sense of what it is intended to do.

The Attendant is an extremely important film because it opens up the space of desire in complex ways that force questions of community and its meaning. In short, political identifications become crucial sites for the articulation of a radical vision of black diaspora community. Julien posed such questions in a context that takes community not to be something given in advance, but rather as terrain that must be worked or in Jean Luc Nancy’s terms unworked. The unworking of community allows for the continuous struggle to make community, as a desire of possibilities and potentialities, and not as biological filiation or inheritance. Complicating the place of blackness and whiteness by bringing the snow-queen’s desire into public debate, Julien ushered in a radical cinematic reworking of the usable terms of history for a contemporary debate that often verged on the nationalistic. This public articulation of the economy of inter-racial desire and its complex plays of subordination and domination, all constituted through continuously shifting relations of desire, open up yet another closet — the closet of sexual and racial anxiety embedded in all of us living in late modernity. Rejecting both racist and nationalist impulses, but primarily engaging with black diaspora politics, Julien writes: “Where there is a closet, there will always be bitterness, due to the desires repressed by black conservative family values, which must produce silence at any cost.” 

This insight of Julien’s opens up the space for making alternate political communities constituted on the basis of political solidarities and not biology and other mythic inheritances. Julien’s Looking for Langston (1988) and The Attendant among other works articulate relations to political formations taking place in black Britain and the wider black diaspora. In particular, they react against the crystallization of black nationalist and Afrocentric politics that positions black queer sexualities as anathema to a potential black liberation in a post-slavery world. But the videos also engage the excising of black peoples from hegemonic narratives of modernity as well. Dana Inkster’s Welcome to Africville brings to the terrain of Canadian black public histories and memories the politics of lesbian desire and articulates its absent presence for a more ethical accounting of what Canadian and black Canadian community might be. In a war of position, this video art calls attention to the ways in which the crystallization of black identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s has for closed the possibility of articulating a range of black diaspora complexities — especially when sexual difference was at stake. At the same time, this art utters a response to the continuing conditions of racist exclusion. But this video art also speaks to the tensions and problematics of representability in a world apperently more at ease with queers and black people. Thus these video essays pursue a conversation that requires us to continually engage with the politics of liberation and freedom. Such a claim firmly grounds this video practice in the unfinished business of modernity and its claims of liberation and freedom.

Thus, this video art does not stop at merely offering an articulation of a counter-narrative to black communities and their histories. It shows its solidarity and affiliations with political projects for the liberation of the subaltern of all kinds, by explicitly engaging with the boundary limits of modern nation-states, community, citizenship and identity politics. More specifically, each of these videos takes up the place of black people and queers within their respective nations producing an arbit-
trary closure that is always incomplete. Inkster’s video is made within the context of the thirtieth anniversary of the destruction of Africville Nova Scotia, Canada, a black settlement dating back to the 1800s. In what can only be characterized as state sponsored and sanctioned racism, Inkster nonetheless sheds new light on what other histories / desires and unspoken might have been destroyed in the demolition of Africville. She commemorates blackness in Canada when the state does not. Both artists question the blindspots and restrictive boundaries of community and national formations as a way to engage the viciousness of modernity.

The filmmakers have an ability to return life’s representations in complex and existing ways, moving beyond painful cultural moments and ending those moments useful for thinking about the ways in which black people’s lives remain meaningful and joyous without sinking into the depths of its pain and victimage. In fact, by remembering the destruction of one of black Canada’s oldest communities Inkster’s Welcome to Africville exemplifies this dilemma. The dilemma of not only what to remember but how to remember it. The narrative of the destruction, or rather the interruption in the narrative of the destruction and dispersal is told through three generations of Dixon women and a male bartender. These actors do not tell the why of the destruction—they refuse to do so—they tell the why of their sexual practices, desires, disappointments, pleasures and adventures, as well as their loss.

Some of the images in the video are actual archival footage of the demolition of the community recalling and revealing all the while repositioning the story of the Canadian state’s racist action. The actors’ stories arrive through an off-screen interviewer’s attempt to gather response to the impending demolition. The video opens with these lines: “Yes they making us move . . . but I don’t want to talk about that . . . history will tell the story.” It is an act of liberation to decide what one wants to speak about when one is oppressed. This is an interesting refusal of history because it is not a refusal at all. It is rather an insightful and revealing way of moving to the other side of the story—the unspoken of history, another story of modernity. Instead, the characters in the video tell the story of a black history of erotics, especially a black lesbian erotics, which is often demolished in heterosexist acts parallel to those of racist acts. The characters tell of love, loss and desire, defying what kind of history and what history can tell as a necessary part of black community. This is a history that calls for decipherment.

One of the ways in which black diasporic communities make sense to themselves and to others is often through various narratives of history and contests over memory and how to remember. These narratives and memories, often contested from both within the community and without, offer a basis from which some kind of common conversation might be conceived, even if different political positions are at stake. It is the history and memory of Africville and what might be at stake in the writing of its history, how it might be remembered, and how its memory might be put to use, and in the name of what politics its memory might be put to use, that Inkster’s Welcome to Africville opens up and simultaneously troubles. Hers is a radical renarrativising of the black pain that the
destruction of Africville represents. And in this radical renarrativizing she asks us to not only remember differently, but to remember what has not yet been represented in our memory of the destruction. How can Africville’s destruction help us to remember, and maybe even acknowledge the active presence of black lesbian erotics and desires in the Canadian context?

What makes Inkster’s video insightful and provocative is not only its complex layering of the visualizing and writing of history and memory, but the way in which Inkster queers the history of Africville, making something queer happen to viewers and for ever extending the narrative of what other evidences and memories have been destroyed by its demolition. She does not close gaps, she opens spaces. But the video also opens up the place of hope to reimagine and to narrativise into that now open space all of our various losses, desires and memories (for after all Africville is now a public park open to all!).

Inkster tells the story of Africville through the voices of at least two generations of black women who love other women. Anna Dixon played by Kathy Irene of Shaft’s Big Score is the grandmother. Me’shell Ndegeocello, the African American musician composed and performed the original bluesy, soulful musical score. The video brings together a cast of black diasporic players to tell a national story of pain and loss, which not only gestures to the historical dispersal of black folks across US borders — before and after Africville — but echoes further across the black diaspora. The video participates in a rather large project — a project of diaspora desires and connections, but is still able to productively engage its local context, to call for a national accounting and something more. It is a product which through fiction is able to complicate the historical record of blackness and modernity. By telling what has now become the sacred story of Africville through the eyes of black lesbians, Inkster creates the opportunity for reflecting differently on historical context and memory, and not only on what is remembered, but on who gets to remember and how and what might be at stake in what is remembered. She tells the sex of memory. Hers is a queer memory with much significance for interrupting the not-quite-citizenship of blacks and queers, of black queers, not to mention the deeply-fraught gender making of modern communities and nations and the histories they write of themselves.

Troubling and filling in the gaps in the archives is potentially dangerous work, despite its criticality. In fact, it is reported that when Inkster’s video was screened in Halifax, Nova Scotia, it was a shock to some of the hometown audience investment in one narrative of the meaning of the destruction. The audience was appalledly aghast that the sacred story of Africville would be fictionalized and told through the eyes of at least two lesbians. The audience either could not, or they refused the challenge to decipher what might be at stake in Inkster’s re-presentation of the trauma of Africville. Because Inkster refused epistemological respectability by refusing to represent the wound as only the loss of property, collective respect of black folks by white folks, and therefore as evidence of black victimage, her video was a shock to some. Instead, Inkster’s erotics of loss can provoke a different possibility of encountering the demolition of Africville. Africville becomes
symbolic of all that is loss /lost when history for ecloses cer tain kinds of knowledge, especially queer queries and feminists queries concer ning the past and what David Scott calls the “changing present.” Whereby these queries do not only r eturn, recover and correct, but they tell a cautionar y tale opening up new “prob lem-spaces” which can act to ef fectively allow for a mor e politically inflected changing present which is in accor d with the continued ambivalent and ambiguous natur e of nations and their citizen-making pr ojects. Even as nations give way to various for ms of citizen-ship influenced by the latest moments of globalization, black people in the Atlantic zone continue to be in pr ecarious r elation to older versions of citizenship, for many it has not yet been achieved. And yet, black people ar e also fully awar e of the fluidity of citizenship since they ar e seen always to be written out and written into the nation as it appears momentarily convenient.

Towards a new or other modernism?

These videos r ewrite moder nity thr ough r ewriting the limits of nation, citizenship and community . By of fering complex, shifting and antagonistic r epresentations of nation, citizenship and commu-nity, the videos launch a deciphering and excavating critique at totalizing nar ratives of moder nity as they simultaneously open gaps for other moder nities or counter-nar ratives of moder nity to appear . But fundamentally what this video ar t does is that it opens up moder nity through the lens of dias-pora and this moment of the postcolonial to call attention to the ways in which some of the most important elements of what might constitute the Moder n (nation, citizenship, community , liber ty, freedom, technology , museums, etc.) might be app r ehended at some moments to demonstrate what is at stake when hegemonic nar ratives appear as if. Additionally , this diasporic/postcolonial way of seeing or visual cultur e calls for or r equires a suspension of what we think we know . By making such a call, viewers /readers ar e asked to engage in a pr ocess of deciphering and excavat-ing within and beyond the video texts so that intended political and social implications might have an af fect of sor ts. This is a theor etical video ar t that unworks as it r eworks the grandest of all claims of moder nity: what it means to be human.

3 The Film Art of Isaac Julien, catalogue (Annandale-on-Hudson NY: Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, 2000).
4 Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the Post-colonial’? Thinking at the Limit.”
En la calle
From an Interview on TropiCola

With Steve Fagin

In his 96 min. video TropiCola, Steve Fagin uses the popular timba beat to lace an essayist fabric of life in contemporary Cuba. The excellent soundtrack captures the color and rhythm of this vibrant nation while intelligently examining the problems facing Cuba during its current economic restructuring. From young Cuban women running off with tourists to black market moneymaking schemes, TropiCola stresses the spirit, humor, tenacity and resourcefulness of the Cuban people as they face their changing reality. Steve Fagin answers some questions about the kind of Cuba he found and what cultural meaning music takes on in his video. — U.B.

My interest was in doing the piece generated from a desire to “perform” Cuban society in ways it had not been represented either by people who were fanatically interested in supporting it or fanatically interested in criticizing it. The video makes an effort to leave the traditional question whether you are for or against it to the side.

The Cuba I wanted to portray was influenced by “hanging out” with Cubans on their porches in 93, during the so-called “special period” after Russian aid vanished. I saw the complexity of how they dealt with things, not simply their cuddly bear, generous, sweet conversational selves, but their frustrated, angry selves, their mean, envious selves, their petty, racist selves. I felt that this should not be excluded from understanding what it is to be Cuban today. What I found when I went to Cuba was something very noisy, very ambivalent, but something full of life and lots of music.

Cuban music has an extraordinary role as a well-spring, as a spokesman, as a sort of great poetic text which Cubans refer to to give voice and rhythm to their own identity. In Cuba, music is word play, political critique, and a storehouse of cultural memory and artifacts. The lyrics and songs are a sort of Greek chorus of their culture, and I wanted that to be the engine of my piece.

The popular music that is in TropiCola, the contemporary timba music of “Charanga Habanera” or “El Médico de la Salsa” or “Los Van Van” is the music that kids speak to each other when they want to express what they feel about themselves, what they feel about the government, what they feel about their hopes, what they feel about their cynicism. Popular music in Cuba has always had the same intense power to represent cultural identity and language as, say, the punk movement had in England in the 70s, or gangster rap has for black urban youth beginning in the 80s.

It seems wrong to me to consider my piece as at odds with some reified concept of “Cuban traditional music” portrayed in “Buena Vista Social Club” because this suggests that some musics are “traditional” and others are not. In its initial incarnation, son, which is now perceived as ahistorical traditional music, was discussed as rough and difficult, including the incorporation of Afro-sounding music into a larger Cuban public. And this merging of country sound with urban sound, the mixing of Spanish lyrical music with Africanized, Cubanized, rumba music, initially sounded far too black for the mainstream, a fact which the movie completely ignores.

It is a very odd combination of events that precisely at the time when “Buena Vista Social Club” hit as a popular moment internationally, there was this vital contemporary Cuban music in place called Timba, which was also fighting for a place in the international market. It had been taken over by transnational corporations in terms of its distribution, and had an audience in Europe.

In some sense it is a combination of son as a base of the music and then adds, as Cubans always add, other popular elements that they hear around the world, in this case funk and hip hop. It adds an extraordinary youthful kick which parallels the youthful kick all around the planet. A group like “Charanga Habanera,” which peaked in the late 90s when the “Buena Vista Social Club” was hitting, is a sort of combination of “Earth Wind and Fire” and “NW A”.

It is not surprising that something that had the street smarts, the sort of nihilistic hostility of “NWA,” would be very difficult to translate into another culture. That translation into another culture was partially taking place already because of all the tourists that were already coming to Cuba, not these “Buena Vista Social Club” tourists, but more the sex industry, wildcat tourist.

They were interested in fun and excitement, and that fun and excitement rubbed up against a very active popular kind of youth culture that was very underclass and nihilistic.

Kati:

Here I am sitting at the bar of the Casa de la Musica. It’s Saturday night. No! I mean Sunday. The fashion show is so boring. I check out the dance floor. Everything’s so white. Finally: La Charanga Habanera! I start dancing with an Italian guy or a French businessman, I can’t remember which. And I say:

“Hi! Where you from? My name is Kati. What’s your name, please? You like Cuba? You like the Cuban girls?— Why doesn’t he bathe once in awhile?

“Today is very hot!”— God, he really stinks!

“I’m thirsty, I’m hungry”— this man smells like pure vinegar. And he’s so fat!
“Hi! Where’ you from? My name is Kati. What’s your name, please? You like Cuba? You like the Cuban girl?”— It bothers me that he gets his way because of his financial power. If I want to have nice clothes I have to put up with his big fat belly.

“You like a Cuban girl”— I don’t have the dollars to go to a concert or buy nice clothes.

_Reciting Charanga Habanera music in a monotonous voice, a dollar pasted on her forehead:_

Getcha a hot daddy with a cool ride
Getcha self a daddy to take care of you
Have some fun. Get what you deserve
Over thirty but not yet fifty
Let him pay all your bills
A sugar daddy with lots of cash
A hot daddy with a cool ride

_Timba_ music was on the precipice of becoming international music, but it was extraordinarily hard to promote, because of its complexity, because of the site specificity of its lyrics. Again, the site specificity of the lyrics in lots of ways is no different or extreme in some of the _son_ songs from the 20s, but it is about now, and the roughness has not been softened by history and distance — the songs remain very noisy.

There is an appetite for “traditional” music whose historical roughness and difficulty is from another period, softened by time and distance. They do not want intimacy with the difficulties of that culture, or the type of work that intimacy requires, but rather the memory of intimacy. They want music with no fingerprints, ostensibly, music with no difficulties, music that is pure, that is what they imagine they are getting. But there is no such music. Music grows out of sociological formations, it runs up against specific tensions and efforts to fuse which are difficult, and that is what makes it interesting. The difficulty makes it interesting, not its simplicity.

Now, the guiding principal of “world music,” whether it is Peter Gabriel going to Africa or Ry Cooder going to Cuba, is to take a sound that is very popular at a very local, street level and change it to make it consumable by an international audience. The first step in this process is the reduction of the texture that makes it street, local music. Usually, you are talking about pulling back or nearly eliminating the percussive element, softening the music and emphasizing its lyrical quality instead of the percussive quality. You are taking it from being a foreground, participatory, percussive music and making it a sort of ambient easy-listening background music.

There is an international liberal audience that is specifically interested in Cuba, and “Buena Vista Social Club” as a phenomena comes at a point when that community is hitting a wall in their
positive fantasy about Cuba: it no longer seems tenable within almost any community to hold the
Revolution as a heroic, simple, successful, anti-capitalist, literate, health-oriented society. Once
Cuba opened up to tourism in 1990, the awareness about the complexity, difficulties and
obstructions that were occurring in the name of the Revolution became clear to more and more
people, and with the proliferation of that information, the audience that had desired such a perfect
version of Cuba no longer had this sort of perfect, sexy, revolutionary society to fall back on, and
they needed another fantasy of Cuba.

So you have a perverse shift from a simple version of Cuba — the perfectly successful, anti-American,
anti-capitalist, ground-up Revolution — to another simple fantasy, one which is positively and
extraordinarily regressive, in which you have people whose lives were ostensibly fully formed prior
to the Revolution, who have somehow been in hibernation for 40 years, and you arrive like a Prince
Charming, you kiss this sleeping, black, wrinkled Snow White, and restore her to life. You allow a
liberal audience to reinvigorate with a fantasy of Cuba, parallel to the revolutionary fantasy in terms
of it being simple, but almost exclusively inverted, no longer being youth oriented, change oriented,
socialist oriented, but instead individual and nostalgia oriented and erotic also in its implications.

The use of Cuba as an object of desire, as a phantasmatic focal point for foreigners, is complex.
Obviously an aspect of the fantasies is the keeping alive of a certain kind of hope, and yet, it is possible
to imagine a kind of engagement with Cuba or any of the "exotic" cultures in the world which
is less about projection, and more about real information. Do we feel inclined to do the work required
to get outside of our limited selves, not for the purpose of experiencing some perfect moment on
a vacation somewhere, but to allow another culture to actually change us and affect us?

Cuba is very alive today, very vital, and that is the good news. The question is, how vital our engage-
ment with Cuba or any cultural phenomena is.
The Blindness Series
A Decade’s Endeavor

Tran T. Kim-Trang

The Blindness Series has been a ten-year project investigating physical blindness and its metaphors. The project consists of eight short-format experimental videos as conceived in 1991. The initial inspiration for this series was an exhibition curated by Jacques Derrida for the Louvre Museum in 1990. Derrida pulled drawn and painted works from the permanent collection concerned with the blind, tears, and self-portraits. I was reminded of Derrida’s exhibition recently when a Ph.D. candidate at Duke University asked for my thoughts on an observation from the philosopher on how artists are blind as we work because we can never look at our subject and the artwork at once. While this is true of drawing and painting, with the mediation of the camera, artists are looking at both the subject and the work. Aside from technical differences between transposition and recording, I concur with this observation since it reflects the way I think about perception, in that, between experience and cultural production is the complex process of memory, important in understanding what we see and how to communicate this to others.

Three reasons motivated me to produce this series: 1) a personal fear of vision loss; 2) perception has been a historical concern for many visual artists; 3) I wanted to explore the perceptual to conceptual process, which informs all that we do. Earlier this year, after a lecture on the Blindness Series at the University of California, Irvine, someone asked if I had answered all my questions about blindness now that the series is nearing completion? I answered emphatically, NO. The following descriptions of each tape and an update on their topics should give you a sense of why questions about visuality not only linger but also proliferate.

The Blindness Series explores the following issues: cosmetic surgery, sex and blindness, surveillance, hysterical blindness, metaphor and word blindness, and actual blindness. It is framed by an introduction and epilogue.

aletheia (1992), as the introduction, provides the index to subsequent topics in the series and is characterized by multi-layered and associative editing of mostly appropriated footage. In the year that it was produced, the video was very well received and enjoyed wide distribution because I think it was exemplary of the experimental approach each of the time: fractured, appropriated, and was in a

< ekleipsis, 22 min., 1998.
vein of identity politics where the hegemonic culture was scrutinized and challenged. Multiple modes of discourse were employed: journalistic, anecdotal, fictive, and theoretical, to bring about various perspectives on the issues raised. Appropriating footage was also thought of as a process of recycling and deconstructing mass media material.

Yet in the year 2000 I had to defend its editing style at the 46th Robert Flaherty Seminar, mostly attended by stalwart documentar y filmmakers who championed the venerable long-takes of Flaherty-esque style. The cut is akin to violence in some views. Understandably in the intervening years we have seen an abundance of this experimental style, where now my students appreciate a long-take for its ability to hold their attention much more than the fast-paced, emotionally-tapped editing styles of advertising (and here I include most music videos). Needless to say, styles ebb and flow, but my commitment to the multi-layered and associative form in \textit{aletheia} reflects a process where every person acquires information then as now, through disparate sources. While the sources are not equal, they should all be worthy of consideration.

In \textit{operculum} (1993), I posed as a potential patient to gather video documentation of eight consultation sessions with cosmetic surgeons in the Beverly Hills and West Los Angeles areas, arguably the world capital of cosmetic surgery. To convince the doctors to allow me to videotape the sessions, I told them my parents were working overseas and that they would pay for the surgery. In order for my parents to decide with me which doctor we would go with, I needed to videotape them. Six out of eight agreed; one was inappropriate for the tape based on the kind of surgery he performed, and the other was captured in audio. The tape focuses on the medical industry as represented by the surgeons who sell these procedures rather than the women and men who seek such surgery. The split screen also displayed text describing a lobotomy procedure developed in the 1950’s by Dr. Freeman to treat hysterical women. The juxtaposition comments on cosmetic surgery as a “desperate cure” to attain a standard of beauty that demands conformity to a cultural norm, and that can only produce an average.

Over the years I’ve mostly had questions about the ethics of not being upfront with the doctors and individual choices. I had considered several tactics in videotaping the surgeons: Should I say I’m a journalism student? Should I be completely honest? None of these, I imagined, would be adequate. I felt that if the doctors were allowed to do what they usually do, which is to pitch their services, this would be the best way to reveal part of the cosmetic surgery industry. Happily for my argument, they are self-incriminating. I am surprised to find that this topic remains to be controversial in identity politics. Most recently, a line of argument in a recent feminist anthology, edited by Amelia Jones, in favor of rethinking Asians and eyelid surgery counters what the author sees as an essen-

roof of the orbit actually into the frontal lobe of the brain and making the lateral cut by swinging the thing from side to side. I have done two patients on both sides, and another on one side without running into any complicat-
tialist stance in my work as well as Pam Tom’s Two Lies videotape. Can Asians have eyelid surgery without being misunderstood as self-hating or aspiring to be Western? Can people alter their bodies for aesthetic purposes? (I’ve also been asked if I were against the Modern Primitives? Which I’m not.) I believe that social and political problematics have to be sorted out before we can look at cosmetic surgery in such neutral terms. But more importantly, these questions and the writer miss the focus of the video, which is the cosmetic surgery industry and not individuals who elect to have eyelid surgery. It is an institutional critique.

The conjunction of the eye as purveyor of desire, the sexual fear and fantasy of blindness and the blindfold, and the systematic blind-spot govern mental agencies have for women and AIDS is the premise for kore (1994). Here, I posed these questions: If we agree with Freud that male sexual desire is vision-based, and female desire is touch-based, then could the device of the blindfold facilitate pleasure for women? And how does fear and fantasy contrast with the reality of vision loss in advanced stages of AIDS? I worked with two Asian lesbians to highlight the paucity of works that represented this group.

Since 1994 AIDS continues to be a major epidemic worldwide, and is now part of the agenda for the mass global protest movement to hold supranational organizations like the WTO, World Bank and IMF accountable for their economic policies and to ensure them to be responsive to the AIDS crisis in countries around the world. (I have a brother who works at the World Bank for the US Treasury, so this is also a familial discussion.)

I am discouraged to see that sexually explicit works are still treated with censorship and am hopeful that a better solution to address public institutions’ concerns with displaying such work in prominent locations within the institutions can be attained. This work was excluded from an exhibition of the Blindness Series at the San Jose Museum of Art in the fall of 2001.

ocularis: Eye Surrogates (1997) addresses video surveillance and technology that allow us to see where we normally cannot. The history of surveillance is woven into fictional narratives of typical surveillance scenarios along with recorded telephone messages from the public sharing their fears and fantasies as well as experiences with video surveillance, culled from a toll-free phone number. The 1-800 number was advertised nationally in the Village Voice, Chicago Reader, and L.A. Weekly with the following questions: If you were caught on videotape, what would be the worst thing you could be caught doing? If you could watch someone, what would you want to see? When people called in, they were given a third option of relaying an experience with video surveillance if they didn’t want to answer the above questions. The video highlights several issues of surveillance: the construction of our society’s desire to watch surveillance materials and its insatiable voyeurism,
as well as what it would mean to have an alter-electronic ego. Many of the callers believed the ads were for a surveillance service, and some fears and fantasies were repeated amongst the messages. Interspersed throughout these calls were semi-autobiographical accounts written for the context of video surveillance. Images were shot on surveillance cameras that I collected for the project, and the soundtrack employed accents and delivery modes to convey another layer of commentary.

ocularis has been the most popular tape in the series due to its accessible narratives. Comments through the years have included issues of ethics in terms of documentary practice. By appropriating news stories for fictional accounts, viewers perceived an uncomfortable challenge to the non-fictional claims of documentaries.

Since 9/11 surveillance is a booming industry. While the Vision Machine becomes increasingly sophisticated and pervasive (facial recognition technology was just in development when I began researching for this tape in 1996; it is now in use), it still isn’t able to prevent tragedies such as 9/11, and other crimes. As we learn from England (and I recently heard that Washington D.C. is outpacing London as the city with the most CCV cameras in the world), the cameras merely relocate crimes to another area, or worse still, criminals and saboteurs adapt to and have developed ways to defeat the technology.

History provides the foundation for the hysterical blindness tape, ekleipsis (1998). The subject is a group of Cambodian women in Long Beach, California, who are known as the largest group of hysterically blind people in the world. Despite the absence of physical problems, these women behaved as the blind do. Western history of hysteria and the history of the Cambodian Civil War are interlaced with a case study account of a composite character made up of life stories from the Cambodian women who developed psychosomatic blindness during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. This tape asserts that the women should be seen as ascendant personalities whose psychosomatic blindness is evidence of their agency. They have not only survived their traumas but have also used their experiences to reflect on life in positive ways.

The video cycles through sequences of images interspersed with black, and increasingly the images linger longer and longer on screen until there is no more black between the clips. This formal process is a way to convey not only the loss of vision but more poignantly the role of memory and recovery, in that the more the women could talk about their experiences in Cambodia, the better they could see. A control group was also given life-skill training, and they too improved their vision when they were able to reconnect with their families and society. In this video haptic vision is at play as the camera scans the pages of history as if it could touch and be harmed by the surfaces of what it sees. The ploy of accents and delivery styles was again used to embody a critique of privileged
voices, i.e. doctors and journalists, who speak for and about these women and their condition. The video is framed by a voice that is meant to be the women’s if they were asked to comment on their blindness.

With existing technology we can now follow conflicts worldwide. I think of the Zapatistas and their website and media-savvy leaders. The condition of mass migration due to economics and wars is on the increase and may characterize the “new age of empire.” Also relevant is the transnational juridical system to adjudicate war crimes, as currently being witnessed in The Hague. There is still much work to be done in understanding and addressing this condition of globalization.

Metaphor and word blindness are the topics of *alexia* (2000). Word blindness is a condition that usually afflicts people who have suffered a stroke, causing them to lose the visual recognition of individual letters but perceive the entire word, or vice versa. Metaphor is discussed here in its function to reveal and obscure perception. Divided into five short sections, the tape draws a pattern with the motif of the finger and the moon to ruminate on language and blindness. *alexia* opens with a quote from a well-known Buddhist passage: “Do not mistake the finger for the moon.” It goes on to present Giambattista Vico’s theory on the origin of language, which counters prevailing belief that prose developed before poetry, to assert that humans speak in metaphors before we speak literally; and then to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory on aspect-blindness, which considers the whole frame where the aspect of a thing changes along with our perception of it — they are one and the sum; the piece ends with a (fictitious) account of Dr. Kussmaul’s (who coined the term alexia) wife as she experiences word blindness, or alexia. The overall aesthetics is meant to be flat to resemble the printed page.

Here I’d like to refer to Giorgio Agamben to add to our understanding of the function of language in today’s world culture and political power of the common. Agamben uses Guy Debord’s *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* to elucidate his ideas, only he replaces the image with language and locates the spectacle in speech, and explains that because there is power in people coming together and our ability to communicate, it is precisely this ability that has been appropriated by the nation-state to construct the common (for example: the American people). It is our task now to exercise political power by appropriating the expression of language. Exactly how do we do this? Agamben doesn’t say but challenges us to find a way.

*amaurosis* (2002) addresses physical blindness. The subject of the video is Dat Nguyen, a gifted classical and flamenco guitarist and composer. He is a blind Amerasian, newly arrived and living in an area known as Little Saigon in Orange County, California. His father, an American GI, left Viet
Nam in 1973, and his mother died in 1975. Living on the streets of Saigon, he sold lottery tickets for food money. At the age of 12, Dat met a classical music teacher who was also blind and who taught him to read Braille as well as supported him. When he was 18, Dat heard Segovia played for the first time on his teacher's radio and became hooked on classical guitar. Several years later, he learned that Amerasian children could immigrate to the U.S. under a new program, and thus began his life in the States. When I met Dat he had already been featured in the Los Angeles Times, Reader’s Digest, and Fox News Network for his talent. My aim in this work is to enable Dat to speak about himself. His is a compelling story of a resilient person, born out of a war, who despite having experienced many hardships has endured and achieved meaning in life. It is a conventional documentary because it also effects Dat's aspirations to reach a large mainstream audience. In highlighting Dat’s life and talent, the video becomes an enticement to get in touch with our other senses to enrich our physical experience.

Being an immigrant myself has greatly motivated me to make works that celebrate and document stories of recent émigrés. This video provides a segue-way to my next project once the series is completed, titled Call Me Sugar, which is about the life of my mother, an immigrant, single mother of six and a community leader. That project will be a long-form, experimental narrative of an indomitable spirit whose life was an inspiration to myself as well as those who knew her.

The Blindness Series will conclude with an epilogue, slated for completion by year’s end. This video will provide a ten-year review of the project, such as I have attempted to do here today. It will be a self-referential work, and in that regard is unlike the others in the series.

Performing Borders
The Transnational Video

Ursula Biemann

*Performing the Border* is a video essay that describes a particular place, a desert city on the U.S.-Mexican border. Juarez City is located in a Free Trade Zone that has been installed along the entire frontier for assembly operations of the U.S. industry. There are hundreds of sterile plants in this town where Mexican women solder the chips for our digital culture. It is a transnational zone that has turned the Mexican rural living condition into a high-tech slum life for millions.

In this type of zone, the colonial slave has been transformed into a post-Fordist robot, cranking out chips in a steady flow. We are aware that transnationalism has created particular conditions under which production for the global market takes place. Among those conditions is the fact that women workers have to build their own shacks into the desert sand when they move to work on the border, that the young female workforce is gradually replaced when their eyesight is consumed from doing the precise work, and that many women workers prostitute themselves on weekends because their wage is not enough to survive, not even in the slum. Transnationalism is a very gendered condition. But this is not what this paper is about.

Instead I want to focus on the notion of the “zone” in transnationalism and how this zone corresponds to the kind of places or non-places created in essays. I would like to relate the transnational characteristics of this video genre to the Free Trade Zone and propose a metaphorical and a material reading of the term “transnational.”

Not unlike transnationalism, the essay practices dislocation, it moves across national boundaries and continents and ties together disparate places through a particular logic. In the essay, it is the voice-over narration that ties the pieces together in a string of reflections that follow a subjective logic. The narration in the essay, the authorial voice, is clearly situated in that it acknowledges a very personal view, a female migrant position, a white workers position, a queer black position etc., and this distinguishes it from a documentarian voice or a scientific voice. The narration is situated in terms of identification but it isn’t located in a geographic sense. It’s the translocal voice of a mobile, traveling subject that doesn’t belong to the place it describes but knows enough about it to unravel its layers of meaning. But the mere gathering of information and facts is hardly of interest, for the essay doesn’t believe in the representability of truth. The essayist intention lies much rather in a reflection on the world and the social order, and it does so by arranging the material into a particular field of connections. In other words, the essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about generating complexities.
This very quality makes the audio-visual essay a suitable genre for my investigation of a subject matter like globalization. In this debate, many issues relating to economy, identity, spatiality, technology and politics converge and are placed in a complicated relationship to one another. The attempt to draw these layers together leads inevitably to the creation of an imaginary space, a sort of theoretical platform on which these reflections can take place and be in dialogue with each other. In every work, essayists install this kind of space. We can think of it as an imaginary topography, on which all kinds of thoughts and events taking place in various sites and non-sites experience a spatial order.

**Performing the Border** addresses questions of international labor division, migration and the sexualization of female bodies in the global economy; it traces the spatial inscription of gender relations into a post-industrial setting; it discusses the connection between the racialized body and high technology; it reveals the urban pathology in the public sphere and describes the construction of borders both in a metaphorical and a material sense. All these relations that characterize the underlying order of this border town speak about global forces that are much bigger than the place itself. This lousy little border town is the unassuming non-place across which many multidirectional strings of meaning can be narrated. Some of the relations are more visible than others. In fact, many processes are increasingly abstract and unrepresentable and couldn’t be captured by documentary practices alone. I’m particularly interested in the spatial idea of this field of connections and associations created in the artistic form of the essay, which extends the meaning of a particular place beyond its documentable reality, and to think about the politics of this videographic space. In **Performing the Border**, the essayist geography and the transnational geography converge. And they both become apparent as artificial constructs.

The export processing zone is a well defined zone that doesn’t operate according to the ordinary social rules, it’s a place in a state of emergency, a non-place where civil realities and national regulations are largely suspended in favor of a special corporate arrangement. Foucault calls such formations heterotopias — other spaces that are located outside of the or dinary social regulations, in deviation from the norm. At the same time, heterotopias represent a counter position in that they reflect and comment precisely on how the normative society functions. Psychiatric clinics, prisons, military schools, brothels and colonies are extreme types of heterotopias. In any case, heterotopias are particularly telling sites, and unlike Utopias, which are essentially unreal, these are real, effective spaces. We can think of the Free Trade Zones as being heterotopian.

What characterizes the logic of transnationalism? The concept is usually associated with displaced labor, global media networks, liberated markets, footloose capital and, lets say, an ambiguous relation to borders. Borders are simultaneously transcended and reinforced, and digital technology

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<Ursula Biemann, Performing the Border, 43 min., 1999.>
plays a central role in both dispersing globally and protecting the national definitions of territory. The positive image is the idea that along with this dispersal goes a state of being adrift, in flux and utterly mobile. We seem to be able to be in several places at the same time. It is no longer the image of the traveler who strolls through the world but a multi-present subject connected to various professional and personal sites in time. This prompts us to reconsider the meaning of place and location. Essayist audiovisual practice has long been experimenting with imagining topographies that connect simultaneous but disparate events in various geo-social places. It has anticipated the state of adriftness, it has anticipated the virtual space.

But with all this hype about mobility, it could be interesting to look at the role of the body in the transnational zone as well as in the essayist space. In the documentary tradition, reality is attached to a body, the camera focuses on the experiencing body, the social actor, and in that sense it is a historical body. In fiction, on the other hand, the body represents a narrated figure, it is a narrated body. But in the essay, the bodies are not instrumentalized in either way, they do not have to perform representative functions. On the contrary, in their self-reflective way, the essayist bodies contribute to constructing other things. In this event, they construct borders. It is through the movement of bodies that the border gets constituted, as Bertha Jottar says. And because these particular bodies that cross the border are racialized and gendered, nationalized and economic, the border becomes not a neutral construct in the process but one that is marked by these very relations. In Performing the Border, then, the body doesn’t become the carrier of narration or history, but actively constructs borders, traces geographies and performs transnational principles. It is always doing something extra to what it is saying.

So if we can say that the concept of the transnational is actually an interesting one that has brought positive qualities to the lifestyle of many here in the advanced world, we also have to recognize that this immaterial condition is powered by the labor of actual people who happen to be located South of the border. When the general trend is to represent globalization in images of free and enhanced mobility of people, this video is an attempt to embody and localize the virtual and digital culture in a particular transnational site. It is not the jet-setting, palm-using business elite nor the skateboarding computer nerd who retires at age 30, it is the Mexican female cyborg who is linked to her workbench by an electric discharge cable and returns to her shack without running water or electricity at night. This image stands in a reversed analogy and in a critical dialogue with those other, more glamorous images that circulate in magazines.

Even if this video is an attempt to bring in a complementary, missing information, it does not claim to enter the real, or to be more truthful than corporate representations. It opens up another artificial, discursive space that is equally disconnected from the real on both the visual and the sonic level. Slow motion, tinting, distortions and intense layering turn the images into discursive elements rather than the depiction of facts. But maybe more importantly, the original sound is deleted to a large extent, and replaced by an electronic sound carpet. The material space is thus technolo-
gized, dislocated, dematerialized and prepared for a different reading. The reading I propose isn’t committed to documenting a slice of Mexican life, the voice-over argues and speculates, becomes theoretical or poetic. The voice is always the same, but the text is patched together from many different sources. It isn’t a homogeneous voice that speaks as an “I.” There is no particular subject behind the narration, even though this narration is highly subjective. It speaks from a particular position that I could describe as that of a feminist, white cultural producer who is in the process of moving from a Marxist to a post-colonial, post-Fordist, post-humanist place and trying to figure out how to transpose old labor questions into a contemporary aesthetic and theoretical discourse in a globalized context.

The performative aspect of the transnational space and of borderlands plays a central role in the video. Once we embrace the concept of performativity, we are tempted to apply it to most everything we previously conceived as stable and fixed. When we once thought of borders as unmovable political boundaries that will change their meaning only through pacts or military interventions, performativity allows us to envision them in a radically different way. The focus is shifted away from a fixation on the dividing forces of power towards the multiple and diverse social construction of space, a construction that takes place through the repetitive act of ordinary people as well as global players. This approach assumes a more complex and decentralized view of power. Apart from deconstructing efforts, it simultaneously grants the movement of people and the circulation of signs real effectiveness. The idea that borders are socially formed and performed is not only inspiring, it truly enhances the agency of artists, writers and video makers since it highlights their involvement in the symbolic production as a performatve act of “doing border,” if we wish to adapt Judith Butler’s notion of “doing gender” to this geographic act.

One of the main questions I have pursued in my work during the last years, then, is how human trajectories and the traffic of signs and visual information form particular cultural and social landscapes and eventually inscribe themselves materially in the terrain. It is not by coincidence that Performing the Border opens with a shot from inside a car moving through the Mexican desert. In the off, border artist Bertha Jottar comments: “You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border; it’s a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing, there is no border, right? It’s just an imaginary line, a river or just a wall...” In this shot I was filming the woman driving the car and thus I became a part of the road narrative unfolding as Bertha Jottar speaks about the U.S.-Mexican border being a highly performative place. It is a place that is constituted discursively through the representation of the two nations and materially through the installation of a transnational zone in which different national discourses get materialized in an ambivalent space at the fringe of two societies. It is through the movement of bodies that the border gains meaning. “They are crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, with a U.S. passport or jumping, as a tourist, a migrant, a middle-class woman or a domestica. There are all these different ways of crossing, and that’s how the border gets rearticulated, through
the power relationships that the crossing produces. Because it’s not just this happy crossing,” Bertha comments over dreamlike, over exposed images of people in rubber boats floating across the Rio Bravo.

There is a particular figure roaming the border that stands for the artificial and pathological quality of transnational space, where identities are collapsing: the Serial Killer. In the essay, this figure transports deeply metaphorical significations of the clash between bodies, sexuality, and technology, while being simultaneously a real existing fact. Since 1995, close to 350 women have been killed in Juarez according to a similar pattern.

According to Mark Seltzer’s extensive research on serial sexual violence, a common psychological denominator of the killers lies in the undoing of identity to the point of becoming a non-person, the desire to blend into the social and physical environment. There is a strange per meability of bodies and the urban environment in Juarez, where the habitat blends into the natural surroundings and the constructed reality blurs with the sand roads. The crime often happens at dawn, when the distinction between night and day is unclear and the boundaries between the private houses, the unpaved streets, and the desert around it are undistinguishable. In the early morning hours, many women pass through these undefined spaces on their way to the maquiladoras, in transit between private and work space, between desert and urban. The blurring of all these nominal divisions of space finds violent expression in the translocal site of Ciudad Juarez.

We have to acknowledge that when we enter the realm of image production, we face a range of different problems than when we approach the same issues of gender and globalization from an activist perspective. The question that emerges is: How can a video, rather than simply arguing against global capitalism and affirming rigid gender identities, reflect and produce the expansion of the very space in which we write and speak of the feminine? There is a need to investigate the interplay between the symbolization of the feminine and the economic and material reality of women.

I would locate my work as a video maker in that zone. Even if video as a medium promises to be of great use for activist work, I don’t see its main purpose so much in catalyzing direct social change, nor would I reduce it to a mere contribution to an ongoing discourse. I see its primary potential in mediation between the two, as an effective intervention in the per formative act of representation.

1 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in Diacritics 16 (Spring 1986).
2 The complete script is published in Ursula Biemann, Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces (Berlin: b_books, 2000).
**Video-Essayism**

**On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional**

Jörg Huber

In the field of cultural studies, terms and metaphors of the transitional abound in the descriptions of the current social and cultural conditions. People talk about shifts and knots, about interfaces and networks, about transversality and the dissolution of boundaries. The “world” to be observed and represented is characterized by intermediate states, by nomadism and hybridity. Much of what has been described by the term ‘postmodern’ and theoretically worked through in poststructuralism remains active and effective. Concrete conditions for these symptomatic after-effects can be named: new communication technologies and globalisation in its many forms are only two of the most frequently cited. And countless people are indeed on the move or live in exile, whether by choice or by necessity. Just as many move in virtual networks all over the globe. Products, people, and signs float globally, apparently without clear reference or direction. Permanent attributions are hardly possible, and self-descriptions turn out to be contingent narrations.

What the term multiculturalism indicates in the social field as a pluralistic context of transitional and boundary phenomena, of provisional and shifting worlds, manifests itself in the aesthetic field as a kaleidoscope of perspectives and sketches of meaning making. Specific theoretical procedures must be developed that enable us to analyze and adequately represent this situation, which all of us know from personal experience in one way or the other. Practical experience shows that traditional forms of knowledge production with their enclosure into disciplines and dogmatic methods are hardly adequate to this task. It rather requires an approach that understands itself as an open, interminable and transdisciplinary process which is self-reflexive of its procedure, also in terms of its style.

The achievement of this approach lies in the degree in which it is able to continuously question the availability of knowledge and the accountability of those who know. Hence the importance of understanding how the phenomenological object influences the method by which it is being represented and produced as a scientific and theoretical object. Thus any theory production that deals with visual culture must itself also be understood as a formative process with an explicitly aesthetic quality and meaning.

This places theory in a mutual relation to the visual arts and, by extension, to an aesthetic practice which itself expounds theory both in their processes and products. Visual art projects can be productive of theory by generating and visualizing perceptual events while at the same time revealing the aesthetic treatment of the phenomena. A variety of strategies and (trans)media are implemented...
mented to achieve that. Essayism proposes a whole range of procedures which can be put to use for theory-building. These formative transfers between theory and aesthetic practice constitute the core of the video essayist project.

The purpose of this text, then, is to investigate how the essay, and in particular the video essay, can be made productive for a theory-practice of the transitional with a particular focus on visual culture. When artists and theorists meet on the level of a transitional practice in which their strategies and experiences converge and when they converse in a language in and about images, a scene is being created that stimulates the free circulation of aesthetic practice, theoretical work, and social criticism. This convergence has a political significance with respect to the conception and power of current institutional and economic scenarios of knowledge production and distribution. This raises the questions if and how the essay, through a greater conciseness of its “internal” condition, can impact on its “external” institutional framing.

To arrive at a more precise understanding of the essayistic quality, it may be useful to identify a number of characteristics — speaking not so much of the “essay” as a clearly defined genre, but rather of the essayistic as a particular method and approach. The video essayistic mode emphasizes:

- the relations between text and image, between discursivity and perception;
- the fact that these relations cannot be organized unambiguously (into ‘image = apprehension’ and ‘text = discursivity’);
- the subjective positioning of any utterance and/or perception, and thus
- its directionality or perspective character, and hence
- the significance of authorship as a process of positioning;
- the significance of perception and thus of mediation between apprehension and cognition;
- reflection as an integral part of the method and the approach, and thus
- their process character and interminability;
- the preliminary character of claims and arguments, and thus
- the performatory quality of thinking, writing and imaging;
- the experimental quality of cognition and perception, playing with terms and images, venturing inventions, making unconventional transfers;
- the commitment to what it engages in while simultaneously insisting on distance.

The essayistic exposes the process of subjective perception and associative thinking; it is involved in translation and transition; it focuses on the ambulatory character of imagination, far removed from any programmatic statements. As Adorno emphasized, this process of essayist practice is a process of appropriation and constitutes its similarity with art. To be unbound does not, however, mean to be ungrounded: The Greek term theoréin means perceiving and a mental “looking at” relatedness to an object — and construction of visibility. Essayist video works are interesting exactly because of the way in which they take their point of departure from the perception of things and
phenomena — from a perception which marks the specific ways and opportunities of everyday experience, of being-in-the-world, of opening the world. The video essay is a particularly appropriate method for experimenting with ways of perceiving and seeing, focusing on the phenomenology of perception. By experimenting with perceptions, the object of perception is observed as a perceived object; it is represented and produced by perception. The phenomenon is what happens and what is manifested. The video-essay focuses on the process of perceiving events and on the process of their manifestation, their emergence. Using a term employed by Georges Didi-Huberman, one could call this a “symptomatic visuality,” which is fundamentally different from any kind of iconicity. The point of the video-essay is to test experimentally how “world” is being produced and made relevant in and through being perceived. It is about the construction of visibility and invisibility.

Through essayistic approaches, close relations emerge between the practices of art, cultural studies, science, and theory. In the foreground are the experimental aspects of testing and exploring various options: transitional stages and processes which have not yet been conditioned by the claim to a reified objective truth. Essayistic approaches are interested in what is behind the curtain, behind official and public accounts, in order to understand how things emerge and how people work and think.

Taking a look at the role of the laboratory in science, biologist and philosopher Hans-Jörg Rheinberger points out that the “experimental practices and the laboratory have increasingly taken central stage in science studies.” What is remarkable are two aspects: First, in contrast to the public space of scientific communication, the laboratory is understood as a private space, in which the subjective and creative side, i.e. of authorship, is most significant. The experiment in the “transitional space” shows that “just like literature or art, science also has a style.”

The space of the essayistic is marked by the significance of the subjectivity of authorship, of the experimental, and thus of style and aesthetics (as aisthesis) in an epistemic context.

Using methods which favor construction and constant deferal, the essayistic reacts to an interest in questions of emergence, production, and disfiguration in art, science, and theory. Essayistic constructivism is a practice, a deconstruction of conventional approaches. It is thus a critique. Hence the essayistic is characterized for mally and conceptually by methods of confrontation between the obviously incongruous, by de- and re-contextualization, by cuts and techniques of montage, collage and assemblage. Testing experimental set-ups and provisionally assembling various elements, the essayistic works in constellations and with gaps and openings, in the interfaces between intervention and laissez faire, between emergence and production.

In this work the author’s significance is not in being an agency in control over the material, but rather as someone who arranges things, competently or dering, staging, commenting, but also losing him-/herself in the subject matter, letting things happen to him/ her. The essayistic mode enables openings in which something happens or breaks through that cannot be seamlessly cate-
gorized or fully explained. These are the creative moments in which something emerges and which account for the quality of video-work — as opposed to those videos in which the commentary as ‘His Master’s Voice’ covers everything up and thus destroys the essayistic quality of the essay.

Video-essayism is productive in generating possibilities for the connection of various elements, for the production of links and chains, for initiating differences. This is not an appropriation and solidification, but rather a way to access “world” by traversing it — as iteration — and to open it to observation through translations and communications. Essayism shifts the perspective of meaning-making to the horizon of communication. The current theoretical debate is also inspired by this.

The theory that emerges in the context of cultural studies assumes that it cannot be separated from its situational conditioning. The challenge lies in the question how theoretical thought can be integrated into everyday experience — theory as living practice. Thus, theory is to be understood as a trace of its concrete conditions, of its point de départ. To question its embeddedness in the context of everyday life points to the significance of the event quality of the subject matter which it refers to, of the sensual perception with which this takes place, and of the method with which the theory operates its translations.

Theory is performative in that something is set in motion which in turn sets something else in motion. The thought that “yields to the impulse of the sense object” (Didi Huberman) is the performance of the self-positioning of the thinker and thus a critique of the Cartesian tradition. Iain Chambers indicates this horizon: “The decentering of the classical individual leads also to a weakening and dissolution of the rationalist episteme, of the Western cogito, which used to anchor and guarantee the subject as a privileged pivotal point of knowledge, truth, and being.” Here, too, we recognize unhinging and new positioning. What remains important in the mediation of experimental openness, however, is the claim for a responsible agency which represents at the same time a critique of dominant relations of competence and access. I will come back to this.

First I want to talk briefly about the use of images in the context of essayism. Images expand the range of possible methods of perception and representation through a visual dimension. They open specific opportunities of construction and representation of temporalities and spatialities, of condensation and vividness. Images can be differentiated according to their medial and material realization, their origin, use, and referentiality. In video-essayism, images are placed in relation to language, text, acoustic elements, and to each other.

On the one hand, this foregrounds their reference to something outside the image: The images show people, objects, scenes, and processes. On the other hand, the images refer to themselves as images — i.e. to their production, their use, their mediality — as well as to other images, other media, other forms of representation. The essayist montage plays on the ambiguity and plurality of the referentiality of images and visual material.
What matters for this context is the second aspect, namely the question not so much of what the images show but how they show something as images, and how they show this as images. We shift from the vertical orientation of images indicating a world outside the images toward a horizontal orientation, moving the focus away from the “meaning” of these images to the fact that they have been produced for specific uses. The images contain or are themselves traces of their origins. The traces mark their origin as something that set them in motion and at the same time as that which sets them in motion in the context of their use in the essay. It is quite obvious that a parallel exists between this conception and the creation of theory. Images follow trails that expand in their media to generate a network of representations.

Bruno Latour distinguishes in this context between inner and outer referents. Using examples from the sciences, he shows how images that are being produced and used do not show “reality” but rather as for ms of representation refer to other for ms of representation. In the process of scientific discovery, this inner referentiality is crucial. The transversality of representations generates their circulation and constellation. This “intericonicity” sets in motion a process of connections, transitions, constructions, recontextualizations by means of shifts, grafts, hybridizations, overlaps, and creations of synapses. The signified becomes the signifier, which again becomes the signified: the bringing forth of images is a movement of iteration and differentiation, which is the principle of the essayism. This is where the creative potential of visual images and visual forms in language such as metaphors and metonymies manifests itself. “Images, symbols, metaphors are well suited to serve as points of relay, as hinges and translations which mediate between various cycles or connect discourses and their fields of being.”

The implications for epistemological models are obvious. “The formerly unambiguous tree of knowledge, which has flourished more or less from the Middle Ages through Enlightenment and into the 20th century, seems to have been replaced by a general sliding, gliding and shifting, where any discourse can transform into any other discourse, where it can be continued in other fields, be grafted onto anything and placed anywhere else.”

The essayistic approach to images enables a “double viewing” such as proposed by Jan Verwoert in his contribution, which goes beyond the opposition between discursivity, distance, critique on the one hand, and a mindless fascination with visual suggestiveness on the other hand.

By way of concluding I would like to come back briefly to the problem of self-positioning and the performativity of authorship. Turning to the deconstructive, the transitional, the hybrid or the wild runs the risk of getting lost in interminable loops of eff ection. Placeless and constantly on the move, we run the danger of losing the option of producing something of political relevance, which would be visible and hold its ground. Questions of positioning, of standpoints, of accountabilities are of central importance, but not as a falling back on quasi-ontological fixations, but rather as the development of pr eliminar y and relational positioning, as a practice of critique.
The videos presented in this publication point to these aspects: with respect to situations and histories e.g. *Performing the Border* by Ursula Biemann and *The Empty Center* by Hito Steyerl; with respect to the construction of ethnic subjectivity and representation — who is talking and seeing for whom?— the contributions by Walid Ra’ad and Angela Melitopoulos / Maurizio Lazzarato.

Essayism provides the methods with which this problem can be defensively brought into play. What remains open is the question which possibilities and consequences new media, communication and imaging technologies will bring in this respect: whether a collective and dispersed authorship, online-communication and simultaneous global interventions will transform the essay into completely new and different scenarios. Concrete projects are pointing already in this direction. Angela Melitopoulos’ “timescapes” project currently experiments with a collective video editing process engaging cultural producers dispersed all over the Balkans which is run on a common web interface. Although these expanded possibilities are only just on the horizon, we should keep an eye on them, especially with respect to a theory production which trusts in the essayistic.

Translated by Benjamin Marius Schmidt

A specter is haunting Europe — the specter of cinema. Cinema has invaded the realm of the museum, films are “exhibited,” as Dominique Pani writes, with increasing frequency, and a genuine exhibition cinema (Jean-Christophe Royoux) has taken shape through the medium of the installation. This leads us to wonder why films are “exhibited” in one way or another. And we wonder all the more when the works in question are not the creations of media artists but installations realized by film-makers.

This shift of spatial context generates a number of effects which can, of course, be described as a kind of break in the thread of cinematic art, but which represent continuity as well. The apparent break is that the transposition of a film into a video installation not only takes possession of a new exhibition space, shifting an art form into a new context, but also and above all opens up new possibilities for the spatial and temporal transformation of visual images. In Harun Farocki’s art, this change involves an approach in which a film is not projected at specified times on a movie screen or shown on a monitor or a television screen. Instead two video tapes are run as endless loops in dual projection. This enables the viewer to confront both the parallel worlds of the assembled images and his own viewing position at the same time. Seen as a sequel in a progression of essayistic films, the medium of video assumes the function of an “art of the possible” in Farocki’s work—in the sense expressed by Francesc Torres, who emphasizes the formal flexibility of the multimedia installation and the possibility of establishing links with other disciplines.

When a film-maker reproduces moving images in installations, shifting them from the dark theater space where attentive viewers sit to a more or less well-lighted exhibition room in which viewers walk around freely, there must be a reason for doing so. The motivation lies, perhaps, in the essayistic form in the sense of an ongoing, inquiring search, which can be pursued further in the museum “using other means.” The motivation behind the work of Atom Egoyan, for example, appears to come from this direction, as he suggests himself in saying that he has “always been attracted by films that relate to time and in which viewers are well aware that the passage of time generates a level of introspection and self-inquiry in response to their desire to know why and how the image is captured at a given moment.” Yet the physical shift from the cinema to the installation can, as in the case of Harun Farocki, have a radicalizing effect on the essayistic form at a different, by no

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means purely temporal level. If the ongoing, inquiring search is diverted to the montage, it can be articulated in specific ways at the point at which the linearity of image progressions is suspended or at least subjected to relative interpretation and where the spatial arrangement of images challenges the viewer to discover new ways of seeing.

The shift from film cutting to video editing is of essential importance in this context. This is evident in Farocki’s very first installation, *Schnittstelle (Section, 1995)*, a kind of artist’s self-portrait. In this retrospective look at his own works, Farocki exhibits the electronic editing panel as a laboratory in which the aesthetic difference between film “editing” and electronic or digital “compositing” (to quote Lev Manovich), or between film “montage” and electronic “mixage” (to use a distinction expressed by Philippe Dubois) becomes visible. The visual and verbal insistence on abstract mathematical models makes it particularly clear in this context that digitized or electronic editing can be understood in the sense articulated by Gene Youngblood: The Turing machine in *Schnittstelle* stands for new approaches to what were originally cinematographic image sequences, for the computer-addressable time-code that turns the organization of the cinematographic space into an abstract structure derived from mathematics.

In one of his most recent installations entitled *Auge/Maschine (Eye Machine, 2001)*, Farocki emphasized the calculable nature of digital images again in a spatial configuration installed as a dual projection. Here, one experiences the comparison between analog images created through the effects of light and recorded or altered by human hands, and digitally recorded or processed images registered by machines and altered by computers. Based upon images transmitted by unmanned American surveillance aircraft during the Gulf War, Farocki unfolds a panorama combining civilian and military surveillance technology in which the development of new machines of vision is sketched out as the autonomization of the look. The artist’s arguments are expressed in a montage between imagery and concept, that is, between, on the one hand, the sensorial space opened by the image trace and the random noises and, on the other hand, abstract space generated by the intertitles and interview passages of off-camera. In this way, art forges a link to the discipline of technological historiography. This interdisciplinary conceptual approach and the subject of the calculated gaze are already characteristic of such films as *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)* or *Wie man sieht (As You See)*. The difference between the films and the installation lies, in Farocki’s case, in the mode of representation defined by the spatial setting.

Thus the iterative structure of the film montage becomes immediately obvious in the *Eye Machine* installation by virtue of the possible coexistence of images. At the beginning of the roughly twenty-minute loop, we see two identical images at the same time — military surveillance images of tar-
gets from the Gulf War. These recorded images, which Farocki refers to as “operative,” appear a total of four times during each run of the loop, always doubled at first, but then split into image and text and combined with different images each time. The first time they appear, their lack of visual clarity is underscored. The emphasis shifts in the second appearance to their predetermined character and the process of deciphering them. In the third appearance, the political dimension of the remote-controlled invasion is associated with civilian simulation techniques used in architecture. The fourth and last time they appear, Farocki refers back to their publication, to the media coverage of the much-commented Gulf War, of which some prophets of the Apocalypse say that it didn’t happen, citing the lack of comprehensible visual images. “Not propaganda, rather advertising for intelligent machines” is the message at the conclusion of Farocki’s installation _Eye Machine_.

This summary is expressed in a condensed review of the accelerated progress of surveillance technology during the past ten years. Simulation, recording and presentation techniques that do not involve the human eye have long since found their place in the civilian world, where patients are monitored, bridges simulated, spaces and objects identified by mobile, “seeing” robots. Farocki arranges these new images, their visual comprehensibility being progressively perfected by technicians, in a game of repetition and difference that initially confronts the viewer as a puzzle.

If the industrial age replaced manual labor with machine labor, Farocki shows that this substitution is still oriented toward the product of manual labor. And he sees machine vision in precisely the same way: The human eye still serves as the standard for certain algorithmically optimized forms of presentation. In the installation _Eye Machine_, the viewer is offered the comparison between man-made images and technical simulation simultaneously. We see a bridge model rotating in virtual space, and next to it on the right the film image of the real construction. The graphic structure is the same; only the movement in the picture is different. The bridge no longer moves, but traffic moves on the bridge instead. Here it becomes evident that the differences between the analog and the digital image are differences of degree. The organization of images appears much more important than the method used to record or generate them. In Farocki’s works, the digital image is shown to be something that works like an information panel. It no longer refers, like the cinematographic screen mask (the famous “cache” described by Bazin), to something external, but the screen. Farocki aims at a difference between the qualities of being analog and being digital, which is closely related to Deleuze’s definition of the numeric image, according to which in such images “the position is less similar to that of an eye than to that of an over-stimulated brain that is constantly taking in information: the brain/information pairing replaces the eye/nature pairing.”

Through the doubling of centrally matted image fields, Farocki pursued expanded cinema further through videographic means. The difference between showing the two tapes next to one another, as was done in the New York gallery, or at right angles to each other, as was the case at the ZKM,
Center for Art and Media Technology, in Karlsruhe and at the “Le Plateau” exhibition hall in Paris, is not merely one of degree for the viewer, who must move his head more in one case and less in the other to keep an eye on both sequences. The disposition of the images localizes the viewer in relation to the exhibition space as well, pulling him into a corner (in the case of the right-angle projection) or holding him in place in front of a wall (in the side-by-side presentation). The double images may fix the viewer in position perhaps even more than the single-screen projections, due less to an idea of stereoscopic depth, which may emerge in the brief moment of figurative duplication, than to the direct appeal for heightened attention that is inherent in the exhibition setting.

The viewer of Eye Machine is involved in reflection on the technical images not only by virtue of the written commentary or the specific sequence of images on the individual channels but above all by the particular arrangement of the two image sequences running in parallel, which he is tempted to try to relate to one another. When Farocki feeds into these channels the “found” machine images he calls “operative” and at the same time displays their technical production within the context of experiments with robots, he is concerned less with the fascinating performance of new image machines than with the question of the cultural relationship between the human eye and the machines of vision.

In the earlier video installation entitled I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts (2000), Farocki turned his attention to a subject that allowed him to link the question of visual representation with the matter of the viewer’s vantage point without losing sight of the political dimension of the represented subject itself. In I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts, the spatial context of surveillance is also exposed to scrutiny, as an architectural figure of the kind Michel Foucault transposed from Bentham’s Panopticon to other closed institutions for the purpose of analyzing the microscopic workings of power in disciplinary societies.

“Found” images are removed from their original instrumental arrangement and used here as material for essayist figuration. However, the original spatial context remains present as a trace in the inserted subtitles, the printed words and the part-narrative, part-descriptive and analytical commentaries or original sounds from off camera. In this way, one visual constellation is transported into another in order to be reinterpreted and viewed by the second one. Thus multiple images and visual contexts created independently of one another collide here. Interspersed with subtitles, the recorded images intersect and reflect one another. In complex sequences alternating between two parallel images they generate a game of repetition and difference. As moments of crystallization in the installation, such concepts as “identity,” “surveillance” and “searching” emerge and expose themselves clearly to view in the field of tension between body and machine, between manual and technical processing. We see not only videographed convicts but also their graphic equivalents in

images registered and transmitted by electronic motion sensors. Between surveillance videos from a California high-security prison and computer simulations of movements performed by shoppers in supermarkets, a complex structure of the digital and the analog, of simultaneity and succession, of the verbal and the visible emerges in Farocki’s visual architecture. One could describe these paired arrangements in loops and rotating movements with reference to the structure of the double helix, in keeping with a visual montage-metaphor from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Ici et ailleurs* and a conceptual image described by Raymond Bellour. 

The basic material for *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* originated in various different surveillance contexts. Michel Foucault defined this type of context in *Surveiller et punir (Surveillance and Punishment)* as a configuration of a certain relationship between seeing and visibility. Applied to the waning 20th century, this surveillance situation can be understood as a model for the central context of the medium of video. In this sense, Anne-Marie Duguet sees the video context as the articulation of specific viewing orientations or modes of involvement on the part of the viewer, but also in a more general way in the sense of the Greek meaning of the word *mèchané* as the technical configuration of a mechanical system that sets different instances of speech or visual representation in motion. Whence media artists such as Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola and Dan Graham place the viewer in alternating positions as the subject and object of seeing in their feedback-video installations, Farocki, in accordance with his cinematographic principle, does not work in his installation with the loop of live transmission or the dissociation of seeing and being seen, but instead with “found” surveillance material, that is, with images which were once actually transmitted live in prisons but have now become “ready-mades” in the artist’s archives.

Only at first glance does the gesture involved in working with found footage from surveillance cameras appear to resemble that of Michael Klier in his film *Der Riese* (*The Giant*, 1983), in which video material recorded automatically in hotels, public facilities and private homes is transformed into a kind of gigantic, fictionalizing hyperinstallation. A closer look reveals, apart from the difference in the original material itself, another essential distinction between Farocki’s work and Klier’s. Farocki does not use the cinema context but rather that of a videographic theater as a medium. By changing spatial contexts, he creates a new visual structure in order to employ the medium of video in the inherent potentiality described by Duguet: 

The original cinematic principle of montage is both displayed and exposed to critical scrutiny in the installation by virtue of the simultaneous presence of two equivalent images which viewers cannot distinguish from one another. In this theater of seeing and perceiving, the viewer is challenged to choose between two viewing positions or to shift back and forth between them. Thus there is an essential aesthetic difference between two for ms of presentation in these video works. In addition to the video installation, which does not simply extend the television screen into art space but also
enlarges it and stages it theatrically in that space, Farocki also presents a single channel in each case, which is shown on television. In this version, attention is distracted from the spatial constellation of the montage by means of image mixing, the encrustation of one image within the other, in contrast to the installation, which makes a kind of performance out of the montage.

By confronting the viewer with two parallel video images projected at right angles to one another, Farocki places himself virtually where the images intersect, at the point, that is, where a syntagmatic or paradigmatic choice must be made between two alternates. It is a situation which Godard staged symbolically as a question of the medium in his film *Numéro deux*, in which two monitors appear again and again as coexisting images. In Godard's film, black frames appear from time to time, in which the position of the author but also of the voyeur can be inscribed. In Farocki's work, the subtitles assume this authorial function.

In contrast to Godard's film, the viewer of Farocki's installation finds himself in a theatrical situation by virtue of the spatialized presentation of the images “facing” each other at right angles. The first task is to find a point of view. The shift of focus takes place in the viewer's gaze. In this way, the installation sets message and utterance in constant motion. A kind of dialogue between the moving image sequences constantly emphasizes the essence of that which is not visible at a given moment. This question clearly leads to the moment Pascal Bonitzer has referred to as the “blind field.” There is no counter shot of the convicts and consumers who are exposed to the gaze of the surveillance camera, for the viewers behind the eyes of the camera remain invisible, like Fritz Lang's *Mabuse*. This is also evident in Farocki's prison material. A convict surprised during an attempt to make erotic physical contact leaves the visitors' room without turning his head. The watching eye is not worth a glance, as it cannot be located, even though the convict has previously attempted to build a screen against probing eyes out of chairs, as if there were only one identifiable other.

In contrast to the cinematographic image, the quality of the analog in the video surveillance image shifts from a spatial to a temporal level, namely to the principle of real time. The long, static shot calls for action in the image or, as Farocki's written commentary points out with respect to the presentation of several literally “spectacular” scenes, the surveillance image leads away from the norm to the deviation. Farocki derives a cinematic quality from the scenes of deviation by repeating, enlarging and commenting upon them at certain times. He does not claim to neutralize the context of power that is inscribed in the images but instead seeks to analyze, entirely in keeping with the sense of a moral concept of a (cinematographic) scene. At this point, to which André Bazin's equally famous and misunderstood formula “montage forbidden” could well apply, Farocki adds the external commentary of those who published the material for political purposes. He has an American civil rights activist describe the case of a convict who was shot to death by guards, a prisoner who was fired upon with excessive haste and then left lying unaided much too long. Because the shooters are positioned like the video cameras and remain out of sight, Farocki provides no sub-
stitute for them, no opposing image. He remains in visual terms with the surveillance material in which the traces of violence and power are almost invisibly inscribed and adds speech and intertitles to it. The verbal level opens a new angle of interpretation of the image and the possibility of incorporating an imaginary off-screen-space. Thus the viewer learns, for example, that white plumes of smoke in the gray image of a California prison yard indicate that a shot has fallen. The unusual intertitles in *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*—and also in *Eye Machine*—could more aptly be called “lateral titles,” although they function within a given image sequence as such, because they present an image that is always readable in co-presence with another image. In interaction with the repetition this addition generates a deferred-action effect. Something becomes visible and recognizable after the fact. In this sense, the viewer experiences thought in an in-between space, in a disjunction of vision and speech.

“I thought I was seeing convicts,” says a horrified Ingrid Bergman in Rossellini’s *Europa 51*, as she describes the frightening sight of factory workers. Gilles Deleuze cites this scene from the film in a short essay on controlled societies, one of his many commentaries on Michel Foucault. His reference to the scene makes clear that the prison serves as a model for analog systems in closed institutions, in which people are concentrated, distributed in space, regimented in time, and in which a productive power develops within a certain period of time whose effect must be greater than the sum of its elementary powers. Farocki’s film is Foucauldian in the sense that its lessons do not relate, as some critical reviews and catalogue texts summarily contend, only to the prison but also extend to an analysis of the disciplinary functions of other public spaces in order to derive an arrangement of power from the structuring of visibility in supermarkets, for example. Foucault describes the function of the panopticum, which “must be separated from every specific use,” and which can also relate to other institutions such as schools, military installations or hospitals, as a diagram.

Characteristically, a series of comparable images appears at the beginning of *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, emphasizing the diagrammatic common ground shared by prisons and super markets: computer-generated ground plans of a penitentiary resemble the view of a self-service market from above; digital images that simulate movements in the shopping area look like digitized representations of convicts under electronic surveillance. “Identity,” as Farocki shows, is defined by a shopping list, by a number, by the location of a cell or the assignment to a tract. The diagrammatic image thus appears initially as a mental projection here, in contrast to the analog image in the tradition of photography, which is based on the recording of light and time.

The surveillance image is a real-time image which, if multiple cameras are involved, produces coexisting images on the editing panel. This montage technique of simultaneous selection, which is

familiar to the viewer from various types of live television broadcasting but also from the electronic culture of public space, is represented in Farocki’s installation by the coexistence of two video images. They are opposed by the digital image, which is closely related to the logic of computer games and which, as a randomly composable image, is not based on the Lumière’s camera shot as a discrete unit. An early film in Farocki’s collage tells the story of a prison visit in a scene filmed from a frontal perspective. This quotation is not merely a nostalgic allusion to a medium or a purely iconographic reference but points instead to the precarious aesthetic status of the cinematographic image in the early years of the 20th century, a status that also clings to the present “post-photographic” images in the grey area between the digital and analog worlds.

The conceptual opposition of analog or videographic media and digital or post-photographic images, which is taken for granted as a postulate by media theorists arguing from a purely technical standpoint, is revealed as overly short-sighted in Farocki’s figurative demonstration. For the graphically represented and numerically generated positions of figures come astonishingly close to the aesthetics of video surveillance images, in which out-of-date or cheap optics, material deterioration, poor resolution and the effect of copying interact in a way that approaches the boundaries of figurative representation. The material quality of the used worn video film thus leads to an almost graphic abstraction, whereas the computer simulation of people’s movements strives toward a quality that is characteristic of the virtual analogy (Raymond Bellour) of scientific model images from meteorology or biology.

This paradoxical relationship between figuration and abstraction is revealed through the mental space that is created by the installation; for by imbuing projected images with spatial character, a view of an in-between space which corresponds to the invisible interval between two successive scenes in the cinema is opened. The highly symptomatic circulation of images between different media, which are transformed, distanced and reflected according to specifications, is not only reiterated in Farocki’s work by means of a cultural technique but is also presented as an object of reflection and as a mode of thinking in terms of technological difference.

1 This text originally appeared in French under the title “Harun Farocki, l’art du possible,” Trafic 43 (Fall 2002), pp. 28–36; it is a significantly expanded and revised version of a text published in German under the title “Dispositivwechsel,” in Nach dem Film 2 (web magazine: www.nachdemfilm.de, 2001; accessed September 2003).
4 Atom Egoyan, in Parachute 103 (July / August / September 2001), p. 53; quoted from Dominique Paini, Le temps exposé, pp. 75 ff., p. 74.
5 The installation was realized for the Musée d’Art Moderne Villeneuve d’Ascq (Schnittstelle / Section, 1995), see also my text “Harun Farocki, circuit d’images,” in Trafic 21 (Spring 1997), pp. 44–49.
10 The installation was realized on commission from the Generali Foundation (Vienna, 2000) and was presented as an installation at the Berlin exhibition “Der Stand der Dinge (Kunstwerke 2001),” at the Münster retrospective “Harun Farocki: Filme, Videos, Installationen, 1969–2001” (Westfälischer Kunstverein, Summer 2001), at the Frankfurter Kunstverein (Fall 2001), and at other venues.
11 Farocki’s montage system is essayistic, not only because of the complex image-sound relationship he develops but also because it opposes the convention of linear narration in forming a coherent whole from a system of allusions, repetitions, oppositions and correspondences. I take the liberty of referring to a text of my own in this context: C.B., “Zwischen den Bildern/Lesen,” in Christa Blümlinger / Constantin Wulff (eds.), *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1992), pp. 11–32; quoted here from pp. 18 ff.
14 Cf. ibid., pp. 226, 227.
16 Farocki selected this configuration in Berlin (Kunstwerke) but not in Vienna (Generali Foundation), where the installation was presented as a dual, side-by-side projection of images onto suspended screens in the space.
18 Rosselin’s figures are not called “convicts” but “prisoners.” Deleuze refers to them in the original as “condamnés” (condemned).
Most discussion of documentary film tends to be organised around the concept of indexicality; that the image has a direct, physical connection to the reality it represents, in the same way a footprint in the sand is a trace of the physicality of the foot that imprints itself upon that sand. The documentary image is thus theorised as a doubling of the thing itself, a doubling of reality. As a result, the questions that are then asked of the documentary image tend to focus on how that reality is represented, how it is told, shown, examined. Even in those documentaries that reflexively interrogate their own representation of reality, the issue tends to remain how and to what extent our relationship to that originary reality is mediated by that image. For Harun Farocki, however, this relationship demands to be re-read entirely. This necessity of reading the image lies at the core of *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*. Here, the image is not the visible trace of an originary reality so much as it is something legible, something which must be read as much as it is seen, or even in order that it be seen. Moreover, the legibility of this image is intimately linked to the erasure, for getting or destruction of its object: it is intimately and necessarily a form of violence upon the world, its destruction as much as its doubling. The title of Farocki’s film gives this to us explicitly: “Images of the World and the Inscription of War.”

There is a clear resonance between *Bilder der Welt* and the writing of Paul Virilio, in particular *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception.* Virilio draws out the links between cinema as an organisation of perception and the role of changing technologies of perception in the organisation of war. Put simply, you can only kill what you can see: “For men at war, the function of the weapon is the function of the eye.” Etienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotographic rifle (which featured a rotating unit that could take a series of photographs, designed to enable the photographer to follow and capture objects moving through space) is in this context both a precursor of the cinema and a direct descendent of the multichambered Colt revolver. The technology of the image and the technology of death operate under the same principles; the light which exposes the photographic image is equally the light which exposes the target: the visibility of the image is a precondition of war.

However, the image is not simply a precondition of violence; it is, Farocki suggests, a violence in and of itself. “A photographic image is a cut, a section through the bundle of light rays reflected off objects in a circumscribed space.” The violence of this cut is the image’s extraction of the thing

as *data*, a series of points of dark and light to be *read*, to be analysed, thus producing the thing as an object, a function, a tool. *Bilder der Welt* returns repeatedly to the role of the image in transforming phenomena into data; the analysis of the movement of water in an artificial wave tank, photographic scale measurement, image processing, military aerial reconnaissance, police identity portraits, architectural modelling. The data thus extracted replaces the thing, the phenomena itself with something *more* malleable, *more* productive, *more* comprehensible. And yet this comprehension of the object is tied directly to its destruction, even where it is conceived as a protective measure (Farocki’s privileged example is the use of photographic scale measurement to document heritage buildings, but the archiving of the DNA of endangered species is an equally appropriate example — possessing the species as data, as DNA, facilitates its destruction since it can theoretically be resurrected any time, thus removing the imperative to prevent its extinction in the first place.)

Farocki’s film work (which began in West Germany in 1966, and continues today) is often aligned with the essay-film tradition exemplified by Chris Marker. Certainly, *Bilder der Welt* and *Sans Soleil* have their similarities; the deployment of diverse and apparently fragmentary images, a narration which interrogates as much as it explains or describes those images, a constant clinging back and repetition, re-reading or re-writing of the image. The idea of the essay film has a specific resonance for Farocki’s work, however, inasmuch as it explicitly points to the notion of the filmic image as a form of writing or inscription, and thus of violence. At one point in *Bilder der Welt* he shows us an image from the train platform at Auschwitz, taken as a transport of Jewish victims are being unloaded by SS men by the light of many spotlights, and asks “First thought: why all these spotlights? Is a film being shot?” What is preserved, inscribed, in this image is destruction itself, a destruction more vast than any image can show. It cannot be seen in the image, and thus it must be *read* in it, and nevertheless in this reading it is destroyed, thematized, produced as an object of knowledge. What is essayed in Farocki’s work, in his images, then, is this: that the image is disastrous, in Blanchot’s sense; it “ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact”⁴, preservation as destruction, preservation of destruction, erasing itself in its own writing.

This text was originally published in *Senses of Cinema* 19 (March/April 2002).

2 Ibid., p. 20.
Digital Montage and Weaving
An Ecology of the Brain for Machine Subjectivities

Maurizio Lazzarato / Angela Melitopoulos

The video entitled *Passing Drama* by Angela Melitopoulos reflects the auditory imagery of her family history. As a narrative motif, the experience of flight and migration becomes a film theme through narration and memory. The presentation of the video as a performance, in which the levels of time interwoven in the video are mixed live with real-time sounds (unabridged speech recordings, original noises, music, texts from the collection of materials, texts by Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato), is intended to lead to the present, open-ended process from which the narrative structure was born—in the non-linear process of montage. This return to the open temporal space of the stage enables the artists to establish links to the different pasts that exist in the work. It is the attempt to create a trace that leads back into a personal history, the perception of which has also been shaped by the use of media apparatus, which, however, also play a role in determining the possibilities of subjectivization and communication.

The association of the title *Passing Drama* with stage and film also reflects the intent to call attention to the performance character of the narrative. The temporal now was a defining force for the narrators. The performativ act of reporting determined the way in which the content was communicated. The refugees who spoke in the video were elderly, and their lives were, to a certain degree, behind them. Yet it seemed as if they were being asked about their past for the very first time. What they told referred to a structure of oral history marked by survival. The vitality of their story reflected the resonant space of a mental struggle for survival, in which improvisation and a talent for communication were determining factors.

Drama (which means “stage” in Greek) is the name of a small town in northern Greece. Its inhabitants were refugees from Asia Minor. One-and-a-half million Pontus Greeks, among them Melitopoulos’s grandparents, were driven out of various regions of present-day Turkey and forced to seek refuge in Greece between 1921 and 1925. Many of the children of these refugees, including Melitopoulos’s father, were brought to Germany to work in the labor camps during the World War II. From generation to generation and from place to place to place, their story was reshaped anew by a life without rights, by racism and rejection, by economic conditions, by the concealment of historical facts, and, above all, by the need to forget the traumatic experience of deportation. That experience was banished from history and politics. Without a territory, they had no claim to citizenship. Because

< *Angela Melitopoulos, Passing Drama, 66 min.*, 1999.
they were constantly coming and going, they were unable to develop their own history. History is linked to subjects. But minorities are not subjects. The position of the individual has always been erased by the movements of history.

The textual level of _Passing Drama_ consists of interviews with members of the second generation of refugees from the area around Drama. They are statements like stones — statements whose vocal melodies have been inscribed over the generations into collective and individual memory — indelible fragments that have become like a song about flight through repetition and narration. Where the narrative position of individuals came to a halt, where pieces were missing or ambiguities emerged, the narrators began to delve into their memories. Yesterday’s forgotten past was interwoven with the forgotten past of the day before and mixed continually with the forgotten present. For seventy years and more, this history profited from the acting talent of its narrators, who extended or abbreviated the duration of individual moments and images. Political taboos and family role assignments gave structure to the melody and the emotion of their recollections. The statements remained like stones. Breaks and discontinuities appeared in the transmission of memories, knowledge, habits of thinking and living. Yet the blocks and aphasic gaps in the memories of these inhabitants transformed into migrants reflect a truth that applies not only to them alone. For what they experienced has happened to us as well: a radical change in memory and lifetime.

How does one tell history? Can one still make use of standard techniques of representation? Have we lost our memory and with it the capacity to express and communicate our experiences? Are we compelled to search for other means of expression than those of representation? These questions were posed long ago, following the World War I. The long and gradual accumulation of new experiences and the problems involved in telling about them grew with increasing speed. The end of the great story (of progress, of evolution, of the new, modern human being and of the machine) was reflected in literature and the cinema. The crisis of representation was also evident in art and politics.

The most significant research on memory, the brain and the mental sphere was completed even before the World War I. It anticipated a social experience that would have a decisive impact on the 20th century: cooperation among brains — the world as memory. All of these studies shared a common object of research: aphasia and memory disorders. The opening theme in the discussion of time and memory is the product of a break in the connection between our sensor-motor system and our cerebral system of perception. The link between perception and action no longer ends in action but remains a kind of state of suspension. Perception loses touch with instrumental logic and connects to memories and dreams, with the virtual worlds of our age.

Deleuze summarizes this for us in his statement that subjectivization, event and brain are all the same thing. In a world that becomes a collective brain, human life becomes as uncertain and probable as the relationship between synapses. In a literal sense, life has no history, it does not
proceed toward a goal but instead links situations into a chain, and it can move in any direction. It cannot be regarded as a dramatic sequence until it is over. Only then are all events arranged into a history and become visible as a progression of necessary actions. Viewed from this perspective, life cannot be represented.

**Montage**

At one level, the video *Passing Drama* is the construction of a mental space in which memories, active and passive forces, interact with one another, as they do in the cerebral system. Images and sounds work as powers of memory. Instead of concealing breaks and gaps with fictitious (historical) elements and thereby creating a homogeneous continuity, transitions between the different visual and narrative levels were used in *Passing Drama* to visualize the process of forgetting or the awareness that something has been forgotten.

According to Henri Bergson, memory is a form of accumulated time used to introduce a selection. Perception functions within these “syntheses of time.” Perception depends upon the capacity to act. “Perception is a function of action,” and thus “the limits of perception are the limits of our action.” We can work over a single, brief moment from our childhood again and again as long as we live. This implies that certain fragments of input-time can be expanded or compressed as we wish. The camera and the montage technique work according to this same principle of memory. They crystallize time. As a technical system, the camera serves as a sensor-motor memory. It records movement and modulates the electromagnetic waves by contracting and expanding them. The motion of the video image is determined directly by the wave-motion of the matter; it is a wave movement itself. The camera operates as a system of input-time and output-time within the light waves; in other words, it is a system that exercises no deliberate influence and in which time is repeatedly compressed and expanded automatically.

The montage technique makes it possible to speak of the second aspect of Bergson’s concept of memory, which involves changing the duration of the input-output relationship through deliberate influence. This function of the human brain can be simulated in the imaging processes used in montage. One second of original material can be used to create 10 seconds or even one minute of processed material.

In *Passing Drama*, different degrees of time density and abstraction were achieved from one generation of images to the next, and the level of transmission (first, second, or third generation) was structured accordingly. The farther in the past the scene of a narration was, the more the images of this scene were processed and assembled. “Real time” represents the location of the machine (here and now: Germany). The material was not influenced beyond this point. No change was made in the input-output relationship. The present as the most highly compressed form of the past appeared as the unexpanded camera image of industrial looms in the video. In this work, the looms
that appear between scenes serve not only as sociological or narrative description but also as a paradigm of image construction in the story. “Half-speed” describes the place of documentation, the scene of the narrative (second generation: Greece/Austria). A generative level of transmission influences the sequence of the narrative and the imagery. The distortion becomes noticeable, imbuing the material with rhythm, but the degree of fragmentation is not yet strong enough to destroy the customary visual progressions. The dynamic image sequences represent the “generated” mental image of a place that was once described to the narrator (the first generation: Asia Minor) but which he did not experience himself. The expansion of time in the material is pursued to the extreme. Fleeting moments become extended sequences. The levels of information collapse; the text remains fragmentary. The intensity of the process of viewing the material are inscribed with the greatest vigor into the original material through dynamic changes in time. Personal imagination has exerted the most intense influence on the material.

The electronically encoded streams of images were processed during post-production, by accelerating or decelerating the flow of images, and then digitized. Images of places were transformed into levels of time and constituted a hyper-image on the computer, a cartographic memory consisting of sounds, images, intensities, speeds and movements.

This database was linked in the non-linear process of montage with a linear sequencing system. Tension is generated by the constant back-and-forth between the option of arranging documents in the archive and the possibility of presenting the documents in a linear progression. “Montage” is defined in this context on the basis of the ability to navigate within the archive memory and develop new links. The larger the database, the more difficult it becomes to integrate all of the information into a linear sequence. The growth of the archive tends to slow down the montage process, as the range of possible associations between individual elements expands. The possibility of arranging the linear sequence in a vertical, layered configuration creates moments of tension for images and sounds which influence the processes of emphasizing or eliminating items of information and generate rhythms.

The dramaturgy unfolds in response to the manner in which something becomes visible or audible—sharply, slowly or through the abrupt termination of another element. This sound, which grows softer, does not disappear but is merely muted. It continues at the temporal level, forming an underground stream from which it exerts an influence on the montage process. In the non-visual and non-audible range, there are movements that can influence the surface and create new links at any time. The cut is a visualization of such transitions—from the non-visible to the visible. The montage processes proceed in alternating horizontal and vertical directions, and thus the organization of the archive is subject to continual change. New orders comprised of spatial and temporal concepts emerge. The linking potential grows, the longer the linear sequence continues. Entire cut sequences disappear as the result of the effective weaving of new elements into the linear progression. Beginning and end give way as narrative qualities to transitions between the different levels.
The fabric is a structure of links in which the invisible is never absent but merely shifted into the background—in much the same way that a thread is pulled to the underside of a carpet, where it continues to run and can be pulled to the upper surface at any time.

Everything that is invisible exists nonetheless, just as every memory exists, even when it is not activated at a given time. The sensory properties of sound and image interact in different ways. The process of mixing the sound or regulating the volume becomes a quality or a material in itself, as it can be transmitted digitally at random. Different, reproducible intensities in the image can be created with the aid of zoom and focusing functions. We work with visual relationships and intensities generated through layering. We trigger a different relationship to linearity that corresponds to memory. One speaks of intensifying images and sound, of the associative potential and the different connectivities of visual relationships. This corresponds to our perceptual capacity, in which the power of our gaze changes things. It also corresponds to our memory, which allows us to transform a moment into hours, days or months. We finally touch upon the question of the ecology of the mind, which shapes our memory.

Gabriel Tarde contends that there is rarely only one logic active in the brain. The various deductions, as contradictory as they may be, develop in a zigzag pattern. They intersect, for m knots, and separate again. A multiplicity of consciousness implies a multiplicity of logic. And it is precisely this multiplicity of logic that creates history. There is no single idea or small number of ideas in the world; there are thousands upon thousands, all of which struggle to be realized.

Weaving as a method of non-linear montage is a narration of the memory process. The pattern of meaning is constructed continuously in the montage process. Every new element is integrated into the weaving as if in a web of relationships. These relationships of memory can remember or forget (fiction, quotation, report). Distortions influence the powers of memory in either of these two basic directions. The extent to which the various logics of dramaturgy and sequence become visible through fragmentation or the content flow of information is an open process in which structures of order can be selected. The intensification of events in the memory corresponds in montage to the possibility of intensifying the physical properties of sound and visual images. These can then appear as different perceptual states (dream, shock, observation). In our perception, the physical dynamics of the material correspond to the dynamics of mental processes. The recognizable (or interpretable) image (or image sequence) is a point of compression (time) that holds our attention so firmly that these compressions have the effect of intervals. With the aid of habits, we cope with the flood of impressions, but habits also cause us to overlook details and minimal events. Our attention navigates from one hub to the next, from one linking process to another. Our observing gaze is attracted by forces whose dynamics hint at the coming of an event. If it is an ordinary one, it glides past us; if it is unusual, it captures our attention. We observe the origin and development of a relationship. A story grows through remembrance. Or we observe the dissolution of all relationships . . .
Streams of images and sounds were interwoven over and over again in *Passing Drama*. A new, mental and material space of non-linear narrative is defined. Thus the viewer is called into another dimension of the world, which he finds both touching and disturbing, as he senses intuitively the pre-individual, pre-representative life of his own subjectivity.

Psychologists use the interesting expression “amodal perception” to designate this “other” dimension. Like an infant that has not yet learned a language, we still enjoy the freedom not to fix what touches us in the categories of image, sound or object names but to glide from one emotion to the next. The point is not to oppose the representative image with its infinitesimal elements but to move from one state to the next, from the molecular to the molar dimension (Deleuze/Guattari), as we constantly do in real life. Through the compression and expansion of movement (duration), through the weaving and interweaving of streams of images and sounds, one becomes conscious of new logical experiences and perceptions which can be perceived by viewers as vectors of non-human subjectivity.

The infinitely small vanishing lines (the transition to the molecular) in *Passing Drama* are references to the minorities (migrants). The video image becomes an echo of the movements of the mass-territorialized (Deleuze/Guattari), migrant proletariat. Plato’s metaphor for politics was the weaving process. Yet streams of images cannot be represented. One can only connect and compose them. One can take them apart and rearrange them (hybridization). The impossibility of the political representation of minorities and the impossibility of representing them aesthetically originate in the territorialization of their streams.

The substance of the narrative in *Passing Drama* (the flight of a minority, resistance and the migrants’ capacity to build something new) and the digital processing method (like fleeing from cliché images, like counteracting the formation of perception through habit, like resisting the organization of memory by media and like creating something new) overlap. The ethics and politics of the visual image in *Passing Drama* constitute an “ecology of the mind” for machine subjectivities.

Monologues of Disembodiment
Figures of Discourse in Steve Reinke’s Video Work

Paul Willemsen

"Beauty will increase our understanding of the world. (Though by now we should know that the only thing that can supersede banality is fetishism.)" — Steve Reinke, The Year in Dreams, 1997

The work of the Canadian video maker Steve Reinke has the desiring body as its animating principle. Wit and bringing distanced realities together are specific for his work. Reinke gained international recognition with his Hundred Videos, a sketchbook of short videos on a vast range of subjects from the sordid to the sublime that premiered in 1997. Since then he has produced another fifteen tapes. Most acclaimed are Everybody Loves Nothing (emphatic exercises) (1997), Spiritual Animal Kingdom (1998), Afternoon (March 22, 1999) and Sad Disco Fantasia (2001).

It is interesting to discuss Reinke’s work with respect to the video essay, especially because it is not characteristic for the genre. Experimental video has a fairly linear structure even if it is layered; it is a delineated — even complex or rhizomatically structured — development of thought or opinion. In Reinke’s work, however, there is no overall subject. It is a collection of unassuming ideas, everyday life observations and recollections of all kinds. That which is significant can be evoked with one small detail. Reinke does not invite the spectator to lose himself into the illusionistic world of his creation; he invites us to look reflexively — to ask hard questions about ourselves, our desires, and our relationships to images. Different ‘voices’ always occupy a Reinke tape.

Though Reinke’s voice-over is very personal (direct address, spontaneous, intimate tone, often quite hermetic), authorial identity is dispersed. For certain videos it is as if they had been evoked from a kind of personality disorder. Therefore “Monologues of disembodiment” is an appropriate characterisation. The reception by the public is meant to be open-ended. As Reinke states on The Hundred Videos: “The whole series is five hours long and meant to be approached like a collection of prose poems or very short stories: open it up anywhere and begin reading, skip what doesn’t catch your attention, re-read whatever does. So watching it with a remote control is a good idea.”

Reinke’s potential material is quite diverse. In Spiritual Animal Kingdom abstract animations of all kinds, animated drawings, home video footage and pop songs can be found. Found material is often used. In the Hundred Videos Reinke integrates old photographs, scientific film footage, tele-
vision images and a model construction made by a friend. When the artist himself picks up the camera, he shoots in low tech DV, often depicting domestic situations, like in *Andy or Afternoon (March 22, 1999)*. Typical for many Reinke tapes, most notably *The Hundred Videos*, is his idiosyncratic choice of archival materials combined with bizarre imaginary scenarios.

Gavin Butt and Jon Cairns remarked in reference to this magnum opus: “Working out the capacity of desire to inhabit multiple bodies, Reinke invokes the archive as a site for the play and proliferation of the fantasised self,” and “Reinke queers the apparent self-evidence of archival material, as well as pointing to the role of ‘inappropriate’ libidinal attachments and fantasies in making history otherwise.”

In *The Hundred Videos*, Reinke’s micro-narratives play through voice-over with the truth value of autobiographical or scientific image material. Reinke’s work centres on the notion of self-obsession. For many young males their favourite narrative is the autobiography. This is also the case for Reinke. But Reinke’s monologues differ from the confessional tropes that are so predominant in North-American experimental video. He twists the autobiographical. For him, it is merely a rhetorical ploy, and the autobiographical is something elusive. “Scanning a variety of film and video forms—appropriated TV and film footage, stock film, animation, porn, found imagery, even security camera footage—I am able to satisfy my need for self-expression without actually expressing anything true about myself. Which is to say that my autobiographical visual essays are for the most part fictional. [. . .] I am everywhere in my work but you cannot see me. I inhabit other characters at will. In *Everybody Loves Nothing (emphatic exercises)* I speak as a young woman in love in 1930 Italy.”

Reinke subverts the notion of stable identity and subjectivity upon which traditional confessional discourses in video rely for their authority. His vicissitudes often are fictional, often a spoof. “My voice-over, in various incarnations, is the anchor for the parade of genres and imagery that you will see before you. But as anchor, my voice-over is also the effect of, one could argue, a de-centered subjectivity or a radical dislocation of self that is splayed across pop culture,” says Reinke. It goes even further. His voice-over is not only anchoring visual imagery, but also destabilizing it: “At the heart of my work is not only a laborious undermining of the veracity of representation, but also a riposte to the very concept of self-expression, whose many genres I have plundered and rendered mute, obsolete, even suspect.”

Reinke likes to play with the uncanny, to turn the familiar into something unfamiliar. He often uses paradoxes as a rhetorical device, as in *Pioneer*, tape 41 of *The Hundred Videos*, where an innocent family portrait of parents functions as the starting point for voice-over speculations about sexual practices.

< *Steve Reinke, Pioneer, tape 41 of The Hundred Videos, 1.13 min., 1997.*
In the autobiographical video the image is investigated though commentary. Reinke is not so much investigating the image. In his mini-essays — which collapse boundaries between documentary and fiction — he ruminates on sex, culture, being gay, family, etc. His instrument par excellence for this is the voice-over and Reinke’s employment of it is very specific. The voice-over in cinema and video represents the power the narrator has over the image and what that image stands for. The voice-over is what runs parallel to the image, endorses the image.

It is no coincidence that the voice-over is one of the privileged rhetorical figures in documentary, publicity or propaganda. In experimental video it is mainly used in autobiographical and essayistic modes of narration and intrudes into its meaning. Once the sound is turned off, a Reinke video becomes unintelligible. Reinke’s voice has its own particularity, yet it inhabits various “I”s. His dead-pan and diffident voices reveal themselves through pitch and modulation. With wit and irony he plays out different voice registers against each other. In nearly all video essays the voice-over is something that suggests a pact with the viewer. The accent and the intonation represent the voice’s body. With Godard or Marker, to name but two classical essayistic film- and video makers, those bodies are fixed. Their voices have a single register. They are embedded; they represent an authority. Reinke sets out to play with that authority. His voice is multiple, all the time shifting between different tonalities. His voice is detached, not embedded. It is an intriguing, ghostly, floating instance (most notably in The Hundred Videos) that strolls through a wide range of home movie and found material.

There are many modes of speech in contemporary video: commentary, narrative, description, etc. Reinke’s privileged mode is the confession. “He confesses desires, preferences, dislikes, fears, biographical information about himself and his parents. He confesses his desires most directly by taping men undressing, jerking off, lounging around with their shirts off, surfing in skin-tight body suits. The casual directness of Reinke’s texts, often spoken off the cuff, draws attention away from the subtlety of his literary skill. [. . .] Reinke’s video camera is like Jean Genet’s pen: an instrument both of erotic self-gratification and of philosophical inquiry.”

Robin Metalfe observes that for Reinke, “anything can serve as a trigger or screen for discussing his fears, desires, dreams, disappointments, or anxieties. The simple addition of voice and text — both by Reinke, who can make himself sound scientific, suave, indifferent, childish, aggressive, assured, ironic, or melancholic — predisposes the observer to being absorbed in his stories. [. . .] Reinke has invented himself as a voluble character — the universal narrator and strange wordsmith — who by turns comments on, analyzes, interprer, parodies, describes, and obliterates what he sees.” I would agree with Metalfe’s conclusions that though these different means, Reinke develops a mimetic rapport with the visual, textual, and aural material he uses.

> Steve Reinke, Spiritual Animal Kingdom, 23 min., 1998.
Reinke uses — albeit frequently twisted — the formal means of the video essay, in particular the voice-over. However, his video work is not making a statement. In that sense it differs from the video essay which always has an “exposé” to make, even if the imagery and/or the voice-over are not following causal patterns. How then, can this body of work be located? A possible answer may be found in *Joke*, tape 13 of *The Hundred Videos*, where the artist says “There is no void. The world is full.” Reinke belongs to a second generation of film and video makers that grew up with television and mass media, instances that produce mediated reality. The fact that images and visual codes precede reality and lived experience is something that Reinke, like so many film and video makers of the last decade, can only testify. Particularly revealing, in this respect, is his very first tape *Excuse of the Real*, the first of *The Hundred Videos*, in which Reinke develops the thesis that there can be no real as far as representation is concerned.

Reinke himself comments in this respect: “I began my work when it seemed that video had already saturated the modern art world. What more was there to say? I really didn’t want to go the post-modern route — you know, quotation, the politics of identity, the purloining of form — and yet I wanted to create video art. I knew that I did not want to work in the documentary style, but that did not necessarily preclude documentary as a subject of my work. Nor did I necessarily want to rule out quotation, the politics of identity, and the purloining of form. With this in mind, I made Excuse of the Real. As a kind of meta-narrative, I speak of wanting to do a documentary about someone with AIDS, while aware of the genre was possibly exhausted and that one could, perhaps, only produce a disingenuous portrayal. In this tape, someone else’s childhood Christmas footage — not mine — loops over and over again. I thus began *The Hundred Videos* project with a parody of genre, and with, as Tom Foland has said, a wry voice-over that would come to characterize most of the videos.”

Reinke plays out a complex and ironic register that is typical for the 90s; it is his way of opposing dominant culture. In Laura Marks’ words, “Steve Reinke’s *The Hundred Videos* appear to sum up the various concerns of the decade. They began with a linguistic understanding of meaning, and the use of psychoanalysis, a linguistic form of interpretation, to unravel it. They moved to interests in sexuality, desire, the body, and AIDS. Following the anti-visual turn in the arts mid-decade, they questioned documentary’s relation to the truth. But throughout the decade Reinke maintained a conceptual rigour that made these slight works linger in the memory of the viewer. *The Hundred Videos* enter the mind through a tiny aperture of attention and then expand to fill all the available space. The sad ashtray, the sinner inventor of potato flakes, Neil Armstrong’s tribute to his dead dog — they went by in one to three minutes but stayed with me for years. By the end of the decade, in a final rejection of linguistic signification, Reinke and his video camera were chasing *Afternoon (March 22, 1999)* dust balls under the bed.”
Reinke: “Some of the things I prize most about video as a medium are its cheapness, the ease with which it can record voice and gesture, and its easy comparison to the sketch.”  

It is his way to relate in video to the digital evolution, to the popular culture that absorbs us. Marks introduced the term ‘analog nostalgia’ with respect to Reinke’s body of work with its use of worn and degraded materials (surveillance, talk shows, pornography) and faded texture, its anachronistic and technically outmoded means, such as bad graphic effects: typefaces and dissolves. This is especially the case for ‘The Hundred Videos’. “Related to analog nostalgia is the brave attempt to recreate immediate experience in an age when most experience is rendered as information. [. . .] Afternoon (March 22, 1999) is an unedited performance for Reinke’s brand-new camera, which he manages to tuck in his armpit so that he can speak into the microphone while testing the properties of the lens. [. . .] Longing for the material in a virtualized world, Reinke finds it by waiting, and by transferring to us viewers his own embodied relationship to the new camera.”  

Or as Robin Metcalfe puts it: “In Afternoon Reinke makes the space of video congruent with the space of his own body, his own space of consciousness.”

Reinke destabilizes any conception of what an individual is. In “Pioneer,” number 41 of The Hundred Videos, Reinke states: “It is not important where an individual ends and the universe begins.” His collection of mini-essays does not develop a specific discourse but can be considered as a document of its own time that deals with the living and the dead, the self and the other, history, society, desire and fulfillment. Weaving between rationality and fantasy Reinke places himself outside society whilst being in it. Philip Monk once accurately compared The Hundred Videos to Franz Kafka’s “Parables and paradoxes.” This observation can, however, be extended to cover Reinke’s entire output.

1 Steve Reinke (born 1963) lives and works in Chicago. In 1993 he graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. Reinke is an artist and writer. As an artist he is best known for his remarkable opus The Hundred Videos, which he produced between 1990 and 1996 and which has a running time of nearly five hours. He is also the editor of many publications on video and film (By the Skin of Their Tongues: Artist Video Scripts, 1997, and Lux: A Decade of Artists’ Film and Video, 2000). Currently he is teaching at the University of Illinois, Chicago. His work is represented in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris) and the MACBA (Barcelona). His video work is distributed in Europe through Argos (www.argosarts.org) and in North-America through Video Data Bank (www.vdb.org) and V-tape (www.vtape.org).

2 “Monologues of disembodiment” is a fitting description of Steve Reinke’s work. The description was borrowed from Philip Monk who coined it in his essay “Talk Shows and Case Studies: The Hundred Videos by Steve Reinke,” in Steve Reinke, The Hundred Videos, ed. by Philip Monk (Toronto: Power Plant, 1997).

3 AN magazine (Newcastle Upon Tyne: The Artists Information Company, April 2000).

4 Steve Reinke’s Archival Imaginary (Peer / London: Gavin Butt & Jon Cairns, 2000).


6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.


10 “The Autobiography of Steve Reinke by Tom Folland.”


12 AN magazine (April 2000).


14 Robin Metcalfe, “The Black Box.”
Johan Grimonprez’s film *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* takes the viewer on a hip trip through media footage of airplane hijacking and other terrorism. Slick and sexy when it shouldn’t be, scary perhaps not as much as it could be, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is nevertheless a masterful piece of work. Shown initially at Documenta X, it has toured galleries and film festivals all over the world, finally ending up in Australia. *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* uses a purposefully global topic: hijacking provided media coverage for some of the more obscure republics and tin-pot dictatorships in the rapidly decolonising 60s and 70s when even the smallest powers became seemingly strategic. Everywhere, and everyone, becomes complicit. Taking the rather tired theme of the media presentation of violence and attaching it to the now arcane practice of hijacking, Grimonprez injects new life by also tracing the technological advances in news footage. The jump cuts from Cuba to Fukuoka to Somalia to Lockerbie are dizzying, switching from film to video to Steadicam, from black-and-white to colour. We are reminded that history is ultimately a series of stories with as much in the telling as in the content. There is some order to Grimonprez’s narrative, with a loose chronology that dates roughly from the 1950s to
the early 1990s. All the prime movers of Cold War politics make an appearance: Nixon, Khrushchev, Che Guevara, Castro, Arafat; included are the assassination of Sadat, the attempted assassination of Reagan, the Baader Meinhof, the PLO's Leila Khaled. Passages from Don DeLillo’s White Noise and Mao II provide both a literary cross-reference and a theoretical framework, suggesting that art doesn’t change the world: terrorists do. Operating deep within culture through violence, they are abetted in their activities by their portrayal by the media. Projected onto a large screen, there is a certain beauty and majesty to the proceedings as they unfold. There’s an obvious visual intensity in watching a parade of explosions—for example, three jumbo jets detonated in the middle of the desert. But it is also an immensely disturbing experience as these images of wilful political destruction are often accompanied by less sombre disco music.

What makes dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y ultimately so affective is its sense of intimacy within sweeping imagery and history. Real-life people involved in the news stories are constantly explored: the shy Red Army terrorist at his trial; the goofy kid gleefully relating his experiences of capture; the screaming mother writhing on the floor of JFK; the crying children, clutching their toys, at a Japanese press conference. And there is also a strong sense of the artist’s role in the production. Embedded in the montage is a vast array of other, seemingly extraneous, material that echoes the flip-flipping of lounge room channel-changing. Commercials, cartoons, strange film clips (the repeated falling of a house from the sky, for example), interviews and home movies create an intensely personalised vision. We assert our individuality through choice, and it is Grimonprez’s choice of images that brings this film home from its far-flung subject.

— Russell Storer, 1999

P.S. It is impossible now, of course, not to consider Grimonprez’s film in the light of September 11 and its aftermath. The figure of the terrorist has loomed ever larger in the international imagination, while that of the artist has arguably receded, either gagged by politicians and the media or unable to adequately grapple with the devastating changes that the West is undergoing. The prominence of documentary film and photography at Documenta 11, five years after dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y’s debut at Documenta X, suggests that realism is still the favoured medium for addressing current events, with less immediate forms deemed as yet inappropriate. dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y is remarkably prescient in its exploration of media representation of the real and its methods of disseminating and cataloguing history, and its insights continue to unfold.

— R.S., 2003

Shot by David Tatsuno, an internee, with an 8mm movie camera smuggled into camp.
History and Memory, by Rea Tajiri, 32 min., 1991

This moving exploration of personal and cultural memory juxtaposes Hollywood images of Japanese Americans and World War II propaganda with stories of her family. Tajiri’s investigation of this subject sprung from a recollected image of her mother filling a canteen in a desert landscape—it is the most personal of the works that depict the Japanese-American “relocation” during World War II. She imaginatively retrieves and ponders her mother’s relocation and her father’s loss of his home.

The viewer hears Rea Tajiri narrate her family’s history during the time when all people of Japanese ancestry were interned. She says that she is in “search for an ever absent image and a desire to create an image when there are so few.” Her family does not have many photographs or other objects that would serve as a rememberance of that time. All that her mother remembers about that time was “why she forgot to remember.” Rea Tajiri was searching for a history, her own history, she said, because she knew that the story that she had heard was not true and that parts had been left out. — U.B.
Walid Ra’ad’s art project *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, consisting of three video essays, apparently articulates political facts about the Lebanese Civil War, but does so by taking into account that these facts are, to a large extent, always already fictions produced by the mechanisms of representation itself. While we first seem to be merely provided with information, concealed by regular War news coverage, Ra’ad’s videos pursue a different project: the unfolding of historical truths as mere constructions. The title of the first essay *Missing Lebanese Wars* thus displays a double meaning: What is missing here is not a documentation of unknown historical conflicts but the analysis of how such conflicts are mediated. Instead of just another narration about the Civil War, Ra’ad rather concentrates on the narrators of the war itself and thus provides the viewer with a witty deconstruction of the historical as a media phenomenon. This point is made even clearer in *Miraculous Beginnings*. The essay talks about a scandalous camera which, instead of monitoring a seaside promenade, starts to capture the sunset every afternoon. One is tempted to dismiss this story as a highly poetical but nonetheless escapist fiction. But watching the footage of the different sunsets, the viewer realizes that subversion here doesn’t aim at what is represented but consists in the very gesture of representation. The independent monitoring camera renders the system of representation dysfunctional and thus makes it impossible to reduce social and historical events to their symbolization. The irritating effect on the viewer is that of a genuine political act, which—according to post-structural theory—can no longer consist in merely criticizing specific positions within a given symbolical and ideological matrix, but in questioning this very matrix of the symbolic itself. — Johannes Binotto

*Sea in the Blood* is a personal documentary about living with illness, tracing the relationship of the artist to thalassemia in his sister Nan, and AIDS in his partner Tim. At the core of the piece are two trips. The first is in 1962, when Richard went from Trinidad to England with Nan to see a famous hematologist interested in her unusual case. The second is in 1977 when Richard and Tim made the counterculture pilgrimage from Europe to Asia. The relationship with Tim blossomed, but Nan died before their return. The narrative of love and loss is set against a background of colonialism in the Caribbean and the reverberations of migration and political change.

Since the mid-80s Fung has completed 11 videotapes pitched somewhere between documentary and essay. They probe the trouble spots in how we think about sex, history, family and race and what we mean when we say “we.” *Sea in the Blood* was to be a reflection on race, sexuality and disease, but after working with the material for three years, it was the emotional story that came through. Bringing criticism and activism to art has diverted his interests away from the actual message towards how things are being said, often undermining his own statements with questions and speculations. Locating his work between the emotionality of drama and the coolness of scientific explanations, his essay finds a personal yet unsentimental language for integrating with great clarity desperate and painful topics in his life. — U.B.
Linda Wallace’s video Lovehotel is about the emergence of new spaces of interaction, of new technologies and of formations of desire; it is about the meandering of an “aberrant intelligence” which hovers above and insinuates itself into our familiar habitats (physical and cyber) like a kind of inscrutable and formless spectre of the future. Lovehotel establishes its domain—the abode of this AI—in the midst of a multiplicity of narrative lines and semiotic elements, using excerpts of the “Fleshmeat” text, written by and also narrated here by Francesca Da Rimini, as a displacing or dislocating double for the on-screen movement of the images. It is the house without edifices or the floating space-time of the spectral emanation that sneaks through the spaces between images, between words and images, escaping our cognition but leaving us with a sense that what we see is a distorted dissimulation of something new. It is a zone of potential, in which unhinged desire and new vectors of communication fabricate a space for the perverse arousal of the workaday puppets who swerve into its domain. The problem Lovehotel poses is to render palpable this transient abode which bursts out here and there in flashes, leaving in its wake a strange feeling of disturbance and a sense that the new has slithered into and distorted the conventions and codes of everyday life. Lovehotel clears a space within which aberrant desire perverts social conventions of communication and feeling. Lovehotel: a ‘shimmering doorway,’ a glimpse of the future between words, gestures and images; but also a choreography of mutating sensations responding to the deformed gestures of an Intelligence or Body which can only express itself as an aberration of the conventional. — Chris Rose
Over the view of a palm beach blue lettering flashes up reading “Geography is imbued with the notion of passivity, feminized national spaces that await rescue with the penetration of foreign capital,” followed by a list of countries in alphabetical order and rapidly changing portraits of women. Electronic music is playing, mixed with the sound of a modem. As when surfing the Internet, the video navigates through various viewing levels and at the same time makes it possible to see how the selection process is working. The entrance sequence of Writing Desire leads into the central theme like a synopsis: the relationship between gender-specific economic and political geographies and exchange conditions. The Internet, as a location for desire conveyed by language, disembodied sexuality and the transactions of an internationally organized marriage market, is central to this video script. Various presentation forms and modes of speaking and writing alternate and come together to form a multifaceted image of how electronic media and communication technologies permeate our ideas of (sexual) relationships, how they change our language and ideas: the stereotypical presentation of young women from the former socialist countries and South-East Asian in particular that form the majority of the “range available” on the Internet marriage-brokering service; the analytical tones of the philosopher Rosi Braidotti talking about the increasing disembodiment of sexuality, paralleled pictorially by the anorexic bodies of young girls; the story of the Mexican artist and feminist Maria Bustamante, who found her new partner on the Internet; the Swiss author and curator Yvonne Volkart carefully choosing her words about email relationships; and finally the matter-of-fact information given by the representative of the “International Organization for Migration” in Manila, Socorro Ballesteros, about illegal syndicates recruiting “mail-order-brides.” These stories, which are based on a variety of social and economic conditions, are complemented by a camera tracking through heavy urban traffic, by repeated views of the sea of light presented by a bird’s-eye view of a city at night, by photographs of an airport: images and devices relating to utterly real translocations. — Astrid Wege
Self-immolation as a form of dramatic political protest is the subject of the interactive CD-ROM *For a Better World*. The environment through which users navigate consists at the primary level of low-contrast structures drawn in pencil that call to mind the drawings of mentally disturbed people seeking to put order into their inner lives. A female voice off-camera reads from a medical text on burn injuries. In detached, scientific language delivered in the tone of a TV newswoman, she describes the tragic fates of real individuals.

The second navigation level features video images of people in flames. They are chilling pictures of people who see their own situations as hopeless and turn to self-immolation as the last resort. They show the last minutes in the life of a Buddhist nun who set herself on fire on May 31, 1966 in protest against the political situation in Communist North Vietnam; or of a Kurdish woman who set herself in flames at the Turkish Canakkale prison on December 21, 2000 in a desperate plea for better conditions for prison inmates. Another level of meaning emerges in the almost hysterical-sounding voice of a man reading aloud a text of an old philosopher in *Nostalgia*, a film by Andrej Tarkovsky—a character who sets fire to himself at the foot of the statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome as an expression of his despair of the ways of the world.
These Are Not My Images, by Irit Batsry, 80 min., 2000

These Are Not My Images follows the voyage of a disillusioned Western filmmaker, accompanied by a half-blind guide, and her encounter with a local filmmaker in a skewed “road movie” set in the near future. The video evokes the different meanings of “place” as a location, territory, context, situation, and home. It speaks of being at your own place and being (at the place of) another, about identity and alterity, intimacy and distance, about the relationship between the “first” and the “third.” Images and sounds were recorded in Tamil Nadu, India.

These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here) interweaves elements of different genres—documentary, essay, experimental, narrative—in order to question the way we see and show reality. It is a voyage into the land of a cinema that not only shows but also reflects and questions. The images refer to different modes of image-making—painting, photography, film and video—they alternate from “documentary” to “painterly images” created through digital and analog processing and thus question the boundaries of the documentary by asking how much reality the transformed images and sounds retain. Are framing and editing less deforming than the more obviously distorting electronic manipulation of images?

The soundtrack does not play a subordinate role in this video; it ranges from untreated to heavily processed sound. It discourses with the image in a variety of ways ranging from constructed soundscapes which almost seem to be “sync” sound to moments when the sound is counterpointed to or displaced from the image. This draws the audience to “finding their own place in relation to the work and the material it is made with,” says Stuart Jones, who signs for the sophisticated sound track of the video. — Irit Batsry
Europe From Afar was produced in three different versions. The first is as a silent video that shows everyday scenes in various different European cities—ball games played in partitioned sports centers, tourists from all over the world having their pictures taken in front of Manneken Pis, people arriving and departing. The second version is a radio play for which Inge Morgenroth composed music and background noise without having seen the film images. A group of women meets at a Paris museum at noon to visit an exhibition of Coptic art. The friends share a common past in Egypt but now live in many different parts of the world and describe the future as a magnetic field. In the third version, which combines the silent video and the radio play, synergy effects emerge, although the asynchrony of sound and visual imagery remains clearly evident.

The women become projections that occupy places at different times somewhere between America and the Near East and—seen from afar—are known as Europe. But even the name makes the boundary between imagination and reality porous. Now they are media doubles of European women who vascillate between their representation as women and their real existence. Am I a European woman or do I represent one or do I represent the way I represent one? The women ultimately abandon their roles as bearers of identity. As advertising media, the market their projection so that the story can finally play out... But on what do Europeans rely if they do not belong to a European country? Surely not on the myths of a Europe of the past but instead on the invention of a future Europe. — ed. U.B.
Baby I Will Make You Sweat, by Birgit Hein, 63 min., 1994

In this highly personal and intimate travel diary, Birgit Hein has filmed with great candor her problems with ageing, her need for tenderness, the frustration of being alone, and her sexual experiences in Jamaica. Deploying a radical subjectivity, intimacy, and emotionality, *Baby* confronts the audience with a desire that society has made taboo and joins it with two further transgressions: loving another skin color and loving younger men. A particular twist is provided by the promise in the title *Baby I Will Make You Sweat*, which addresses the filmmaker herself, thus turning the powerful projections of her desires onto the eroticized male into the passive state of being desired.

Hein navigates the viewer through sensual encounters and luscious, exotic Jamaican landscapes alike. Happiness produces an aesthetic view and a symbiotic closeness with the beauties of nature. Social interaction, on the other hand, is more difficult to shape. The filmmaker cannot follow her lover’s conversation with friends, the sex is ultimately bought. In the face of the social realities which surround them, a conflict breaks out, which explodes into irreconcilable violence. The man who has been turned into an object attacks the instruments of his objectification: the camera.

In grainy images gained by shooting in Hi-8 video and transferred through generations, from video to film, they are removed from realism and become abstract without losing depth and sensuality. The images are alternatively metaphoric, documentary, or associative in character. Only the factual, unadorned narration of the author contradicts the sexualisation of a country and its people, who have historically been eroticized in film and literature, by performing the act self-consciously and unromantically. Yet Hein does not propose a self-critical film. There is no reflection on the unstable displacements of power which arise from changes of locale in the encounter between affluent white woman and impoverished black man, nor is any attention paid to the feelings of black women. Objects of desire and interests are exclusively black men. Not concerned with political correctness, the essay has opted for one-sidedness—for radical subjectivity.—ed. U.B.
The piece is about the intricate connections between performance and everyday life; about language, identity, love, nostalgia and activism amidst the California apocalypse. "Borderstasis," this strange, lyrical performance video diary is a millennial reflection on the impossibility to "reveal" one's self in stormy times such as ours. Through a series of poetic tableaux vivants, performance actions and found footage, the video articulates the fluid boundaries between public and private, mythical and real, as they exist in the life of a migrant performance artist living in a fully globalized world. The focal point of this piece as does much of his art, puts into question the symbolic vision of North and South that has been fed to us by Hollywood, with everything that its condescending economic domination infers. — ed. U.B.
Selected Videography

Irit Batsry
*These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)*, 80 min., France, 2000

Ursula Biemann
*Performing the Border*, 43 min., Switzerland, 1999
*Writing Desire*, 25 min., Switzerland, 2000
*Europlex*, Ursula Biemann / Angela Sanders, 20 min., Switzerland, 2003

Eric Cazdyn
*Sky’s the Limit*, 38 min., Canada, 2001

Daniel Eisenberg
*Cooperation of Parts*, 42 min., U.S.A., 1987
*Persistence*, 86 min., U.S.A., 1997

Steve Fagin
*TropiCola*, 96 min., Cuba, 1997
*Oliver Kahn*, 60 min., U.S.A., 2003

Harun Farocki
*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)*, 75 min., Germany, 1988
*Videogramme einer Revolution (Videograms of a Revolution)*, 106 min., Germany, 1992
*Schnittstelle/Section (Interface)*, 23 min., Germany, 1995
*Ich glaubte, Gefangene zu sehen (I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts)*, 25 min., Germany, 2000
*Auge/Maschine (Eye Machine)*, 25 min., Germany, 2001

Richard Fung
*The Way to My Father’s Village*, 38 min., Canada, 1988
*My Mother’s Place*, 50 min., Canada, 1990
Dirty Laundry, 30 min., Canada, 1996
Sea in the Blood, 26 min., Canada, 2000

Guillermo Gómez-Peña
Border Stasis, 25 min., Mexico, 1998

Johan Grimonprez

Birgit Hein
Die unheimlichen Frauen (The Mysterious Women), 63 min., Germany, 1991
Baby I Will Make You Sweat, Germany, 63 min., 1994
La Moderna Poesia, 67 min., Germany / Cuba, 2000

Mathilde ter Heijne
For a Better World, CD-ROM, Netherlands, 2001

Dana Inkster
Welcome to Africville, 15 min., Canada, 1999

Isaac Julien
Looking for Langston, 45 min., Great Britain, 1988
The Attendant, 10 min., Great Britain, 1993

Michael Klier
Der Riese (The Giant), 82 min., Germany, 1983

Chris Marker
Sans Soleil, 104 min., France, 1982
Level 5, 98 min., France, 1996
Immemory, CD-ROM, France, 1997

Angela Melitopoulos
Avez-vous vu la guerre, 40 min., Germany, 1991
Voyages aux pays de la Peuge, 60 min., Germany, 1990
Midi à quatorze heures, 45 min., Germany, 1993
Passing Drama, 66 min., Germany, 1999

Eva Meyer / Eran Schaerf
Europa von weitem (Europe From Afar), silent video and radio play, 75 min., Germany, 1999
Walid Ra’ad
Talaeen a Junuub (Up to the South), Walid Ra’ad / Jayce Salloum, 100 min., Lebanon, 1993
The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs, 17 min., U.S.A. / Lebanon, 1999
Hostage: The Bachar Tapes, 16 min., U.S.A. / Lebanon, 2000

Steve Reinke
The Hundred Videos, 277 min., Canada, 1997
Spiritual Animal Kingdom, 23 min., Canada, 1998
Afternoon (March 22, 1999), 23 min., Canada, 1999
Sad Disco Fantasia, 24 min., Canada, 2001

Anri Sala
Intervista, 26 min., Albania, 1998
Nocturnes, 12 min., Albania, 1999

Hito Steyerl
The Empty Center, 62 min., Germany, 1998

Rea Tajiri
History and Memory, 32 min., U.S.A., 1991

Tran, T. Kim-Trang
The Blindness Series, 1992–2002:
aletheia, 16 min., U.S.A., 1992
operculum, 14 min., U.S.A., 1993
kore, 17 min., U.S.A., 1994
ekleipsis, 22 min., U.S.A., 1998
alexia, 10 min., U.S.A., 2000
amaurosis, 28 min., U.S.A., 2002

Linda Wallace
Lovehotel, 6 min., Australia, 2000
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Authors

Nora Alter
University of Florida Research Professor of German, Film and Media Studies. Her teaching and research have been focused on twentieth-century cultural and visual studies from a comparative perspective. She is author of *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (1996), and *Projecting History: Non-Fiction German Film* (2002). Current projects include a book-length manuscript on the international essay film, a co-edited volume, *Sound Matters*, with Lutz Koepnick and a co-authored study with Alexander Alberro on German art during the Berlin Wall. She has been awarded fellowships from the NEH and the Howard Foundation.

Ursula Biemann
studied Art and Cultural Theory in Mexico and at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Her art and curatorial practice focuses on gender in economy, media, and geography. Art activities include a two-year project on urban politics in Istanbul and video essays on the U.S.-Mexican border and on the bride market in cyberspace. Curator of the 2003 exhibition *Geography and the politics of mobility* at Generali Foundation Vienna. Published her artist book *been there and back to nowhere—gender in transnational spaces* (2000). She is guest professor at the CCC Program, esba, in Geneva and does research at the Institute for Theory of Art and Design, HGKZ, in Zurich. www.geobodies.org

Christa Blümlinger
Christa Blümlinger, Maître de Conférences in cinema studies at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. She was Assistant Professor at the Seminar for Cinema Studies of the Free University in Berlin. Previous to this she worked as media scholar, film publicist, curator and critic in Vienna and Paris. She published mainly in the field of film theory, documentary, avantgarde film and media arts. Recent publication: *Das Gesicht im Zeitalter des bewegten Bildes* (co-published with Karl Sierrek, 2002).

Eric Cazdyn
Assistant Professor of East Asian Studies, Comparative Literature, and Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto. Wrote and presented *The Cult of Kurosawa’s Westernness*, a 40 min. documentary (1997). More recently he wrote, directed and edited the most recent video *Sky’s the Limit* (2002). He is the author of several articles and the book *The Flash of Capital: Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (2002).
Steve Fagin
Professor of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego. Recipient of several NEA grants, Fagin has produced a series of feature-length videos including *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel*, *The Machine That Killed Bad People*, and his 2003 video *Oliver Kahn*. They have featured prominently at museums and international festivals and have been broadcast in Latin America, Canal+ and PBS. His work has been featured at a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and is the subject of a book from Duke University Press, *Talkin’ With Your Mouth Full: Conversations with the Videos of Steve Fagin*.

Jörg Huber
Professor of Cultural Theory at the HGK Zurich, director of the Institute for Theory of Art and Design Zurich (ith) at the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich (HGKZ), which brings aesthetic and cultural theories into public debates in both art and non-art places. The institute emphasizes intercultural research and questions relating to work and economy. Since 1991 Jörg Huber runs the lecture and publication series *Interventionen*. He has studied German, Art History, Ethnic Studies and History at the Universities of Bern and Munich. He published widely in the areas of fine arts, photography, film and cultural studies.

Maurizio Lazzarato
Sociologist and philosopher, lives and works in Paris. He writes about cinema, video and the new technologies of image production. _b_books_, Berlin, recently published his essay *Videophilosophie* in German, and *Puissances de l’invention: La psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde contre l’économie politique* was published by Les empecheurs de penser en rond, Paris. This book presents a new concept of production of wealth through the cooperation of brains. For the project _IO_den_cies/Lavoro immateriale_ for the Biennial of Venice he collaborated with the group Knowbotic Research. This project is in relation to the publication of his thesis about immaterial work. Since 1990 he collaborates with Angela Melitopoulos.

Angela Melitopoulos
Since 1985 Angela Melitopoulos has worked in electronic media, connecting the concept of the camera-eye with the possibilities of image transformation. Her videos are considered psychological, philosophical and political essays. The focus of her work is time and duration. In Paris she co-founded with Maurizio Lazzarato and many others the media group Canal Déchainé and became a media activist in the Gulf War. Her videos have been shown internationally at exhibitions and festivals. The first prize of the international film and videofestival Ankara was awarded to her video *Kriks, Kritks... . Passing Drama* received a number of art and film awards.

Walid Ra’ad
grew up in Lebanon and lives in New York. Ra’ad holds a Ph.D. in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester, and is an Assistant Professor of Art at Cooper Union, New York. His...
works include textual analysis, video, performance and photography projects, and concentrate on the Lebanese civil wars and documentary film, video, photography theory and practice. Besides his solo work, Ra’ad has engaged in collaborations as in *Up to the South* (Ra’ad/Salloum, 1993). His projects include *The Atlas Group / Documents from The Atlas Group Archive* and *The Loudest Muttering Is Over*. His work is widely shown in the USA, Europe and the Middle East. Walid Ra’ad is also a member of the Arab Image Foundation (Beirut/New York, www.fai.org.lb).

**Hito Steyerl**

Filmmaker and author, lives in Berlin. Studies in Cinema and Documentary at the Academy of Visual Arts in Tokyo and the Film- and Television Academy, Munich. Her essayist documentaries are at the interface between film and art, focusing on cultural globalization, global feminism, migration, post-colonial criticism. She is a teacher, critic and curator. Her videos include *Deutschland und das Ich* (1994), *Land des Lächelns* (1996), *Babenhausen* (1997), *Die leere Mitte* (1998), *Normality 1-X* (2000), and have received multiple awards and have been broadcast.

**Allan James Thomas**

teaches Cinema and Communications in the Media Studies department of RMIT University, Melbourne, and is currently completing his PhD on Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 1 & 2* titled “The Interval as Disaster: Deleuze, Blanchot, Cinema.” Harun Farocki’s work lies at the intersection of many of his research interests, including cinema and contemporary continental philosophy, documentary, and new media. He also has interests in short form and installation-based film and video production.

**Tran, T. Kim-Trang**

was born in Vietnam and migrated to the U.S. in 1975. She received her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts and has been producing experimental videos since the early 1990s. Her work has been exhibited internationally. In 1999, Tran presented her *Blindness Series* in a solo screening at the Museum of Modern Art, and it was most recently featured at the 46th Robert Flaherty Film Seminar. Tran was nominated for a CalArts/Alpert Award in the Arts this past year and was recently named a 2001 Rockefeller Film/Video/Multimedia Fellow. She is currently an Assistant Professor in Media Studies at Scripps College and is also active as an independent curator of media and visual arts.

**Jan Verwoert**

lives in Hamburg. Studies in Cultural Studies and Philosophy in Hildesheim, Germany, and London. Verwoert has worked as an independent critic and cultural scholar since 1997. He publishes in the art magazines *frieze, springerin, camera austria, Kunstforum international, afterall*. He is a sputnik-associate of the Kunstverein in Munich, where he curated the conference “Wechselwirkungen” on symbolic exchanges between art and the new economy in relation to models of work, lifestyles and personal identity in 2002. He has also curated a series of talks on how to write the history of the 90s at the Kunstverein in Hamburg in 2002. He received the AdKV-Award for Art in 2003.
Criticism in 2001. He is a Guest-Professor for Contemporary Art and Theory at the Academy of Umeå.

**Rinaldo Walcott**
is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada. He is also Canada Research Chair of Social Justice and Cultural Studies. His teaching and research is in the area of cultural studies with a focus on black diasporic expressive cultures, queer theory, postcolonial studies. He is the author of *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (1997) and editor of *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism* (2000). Walcott has also programmed for “Inside Out: Toronto’s Lesbian and Gay Film Festival” and “Rights on Reels: The Human Rights Film Festival.”

**Paul Willemsen**
is a curator and critic who studied film directing at the HRITCS academy in Brussels (1980–1985). Editor of the Antwerp media and art magazine *AS* (1987–1990). He has been the director of Cinema Rialto Amsterdam (1991–1992) and artistic director of the cinema, video and new media project Eldorado for Antwerp Cultural Capital of Europe (1993). Paul Willemsen has been an art journalist for the Brussels newspaper *De Standaard* and professor of Cinema and Video at the Art Academy Sint-Lukas in Brussels. Since 1997 he has served as the artistic director of Argos, a Brussels center for the audiovisual arts.

Die vorliegenden Beiträge machen deutlich, wie viele Apparaturen, Operationsschritte, Entscheidungen und Eingriffe involviert sind, bis vor unseren Augen jene Bilder entstehen, deren Perfektion unmittelbare Sichtbarkeit suggeriert. Faktisch sind diese Bilder aber keine Abbilder, sondern visuell realisierte theoretische Modelle bzw. Datenverdichtungen. Ähnlich wie man wissenschaftliche Texte mit dem Werkzeug der Literaturtheorie analysieren kann, bietet es sich an, wissenschaftliche Bilder mit dem Instrumentarium der Kunstwissenschaft auf ihre Funktion und formale Qualität hin zu untersuchen.

Die Text- und Bildbeiträge des vorliegenden Bandes zeigen, wie wissenschaftliche Bilder entstehen und interpretiert werden, und demonstrieren damit gleichzeitig, dass es sich lohnt, aus einer bild- und medientheoretischen Perspektive über sie nachzudenken.

»Die Beiträge sind in thematische Abteilungen aufgeteilt worden, die sich zum einen um generelle »Bilderfragen« kümmern, zum anderen aber ganz präzise auf das »Sichtbar-
machen« als neue technè in den Naturwissenschaften und in der Mathematik eingehen.«
– Neue Zürcher Zeitung

»[…] neue Schnittstellen zwischen Kunst- und Wissenschaftsbildern erkunden […] starke Impulse zum Dialog zwischen den verschie-
denen wissenschaftlichen Kulturen, die von dem Band mit seiner beeindruckenden Mate-
rialfülle und dem hohen Reflexionsniveau ausgehen werden.« – Tages-Anzeiger, Zürich