FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG UND VISUELLE KULTUR

NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

DATED FORMATS NOW:
MATERIAL PRACTICES
IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

FKW //

NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017
DATED FORMATS NOW:
MATERIAL PRACTICES
IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

EDITORIAL

Liebe Freund_innen von FKW,

die aktuelle Ausgabe der Zeitschrift setzt sich mit *New (Feminist) Materialism* als nicht mehr ganz neuem „turn" in Kulturwissenschaften und visueller Kultur auseinander, und fragt nach produktiven Verbindungen, die innovative Impulse aus dieser rezenten ‚Wende' mit traditionell repräsentationskritischen feministischen und queeren Ansätzen in der Erforschung audiovisueller Medien eingehen können. Der Schwerpunkt liegt hier auf einem Korpus, der sich aus zeitgenössischen Film- und Videoarbeiten von Künstler_innen zusammensetzt, die mit veralteten Medienformaten operieren; sei es VHS, Pixelvision, oder optischen Methoden der Tonaufzeichnung. Das Heft widmet sich somit doppelt der Zeitlichkeit, die dem vermeintlichen *material turn* innewohnt: einerseits der Geschichtlichkeit, die obsolete Formate zu transportieren und kommunizieren vermögen, und andererseits der Historisierung des *turns* selbst, dessen kritisches Potential sich besser erschließt, wenn es mit jenen theoretischen Traditionen in Verbindung gelesen wird, von dem es sich als ‚neu' abgrenzen möchte, die es aber wesentlich (mit) produziert haben. Alle Autorinnen und Autoren der Ausgabe waren am Workshop „What are the Politics of Material Agency?" beteiligt, der am 22. und 23. April 2016 in Wien im Rahmen des FWF-Einzelprojekts A Matter of Historicity – Material Practices of Audiovisual Art (Austrian Science Fund (FWF): P 27877-G26) stattfand: Axel Stockburger, Laura Marks, und Andy Birtwistle als Vortragende, Gabriele Jutz als Respondentin, und Kristina Pia Hofer und Marietta Kesting als Organisatorinnen. Henrike Naumann installierte im Rahmen des Workshops ihre audio(-visuellen) Arbeiten „Triangular Stories" und „Desolation" und sprach über ihren Beitrag für die 4. Ghettobienale Haiti, *The Museum of Trance*. Für die Edition dieser Ausgabe erstellte sie die Arbeit „Wutland". Wir danken allen Beitragenden für ihre Bereitschaft, ihre Inputs zum Workshop als Zeitschriftenbeiträge zu adaptieren. Sie helfen somit nicht nur, den in Wien geschehenen Austausch zu dokumentieren, sondern haben damit auch die Basis für eine weiterführende Diskussion des Themas dieses Heftes gelegt. Ebenfalls ein großes Dankeschön an Daniel Hendrickson, der einzelne Beiträge schnell und sorgfältig lektoriert hat.

In der kommenden Ausgabe mit dem Titel Visual Fat Studies widmen sich die Herausgeberinnen Kea Wienand und Anja Herrmann einem entstehenden Forschungsfeld, das vor allem im anglo-amerikanischen Raum Fragen von Körpernormativierung, -optimierung und -repräsentationen verhandelt. Wir freuen uns auf ein spannendes Heft mit internationalen Beiträgen.

Zum Abschluss noch Personalia: Wir freuen uns, dass Marietta Kesting nicht nur die vorliegende Ausgabe mit editiert hat, sondern der Redaktion auch darüber hinaus als festes Mitglied erhalten bleibt.

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Marietta Kesting

INTRODUCTION //
DATED FORMATS NOW: MATERIAL
PRACTICES IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

Two old tube television sets are playing low quality video images with substantial amounts of lines and dropout, which give them the appeareance of authentic historical footage from the '90s.[1] The two different sequences, each playing on its own screen, put the year 1992 on display in gritty home-video aesthetics in Henrike Naumann's installation *Triangular Stories* (2012). Screen one offers glimpses of a young woman partying with a group of friends on a holiday, taking ecstasy and dancing. Screen two shows Nazi paraphernalia and a gang of violent youths including the same young woman, hanging out and making trouble in rural east Germany **[fig. 1]**. Both videos are reenactments: the latter of actual events, namely, of Beate Zschäpe's radicalization as a teenager in the ultra right-wing German terror cell NSU (National Socialist Underground), which was responsible for a series of assasinations of Turkish-Germans and other hate crimes in the 2000s, the other of the legendary dance parties in Ibiza's Amnesia club, here focalized through a young tourist who shares Zschäpe's age, gender, and East German background. Obviously, the installation complicates the historical quality of the stories

told in terms of its narrative content. We are left to wonder what connects the two videos and their protagonists. Is the Ibiza video meant to pitch hedonist club culture against fascist socialization, almost as if suggesting an alternative direction that Zschäpe's life could have taken? But there is more: *Triangular Stories* also challenges the histories it traces by its choice of recording medium. Naumann, who describes VHS as "the Super-8 of her generation,"[2] deliberately deploys the outmoded recording technology and its characteristic textures dotted with the artefacts and seams of tape

004

demagnetization to invoke (or, more drastically speaking, to fake) the particular historicity her installation is supposed to transport.

_____ The insistent presence of dated formats in contemporary artworks like Naumann's that emphasize the material dimension of the medium, is an apt site to explore a central argument of the not so recent "material turn"[3]: that non-human components in the world are able to produce and communicate meaning on their very own terms. Understanding matter as vibrant and actively contributing to world-making in performative processes, new materialist feminist and queer scholarship conceptualizes relations between objects and observers, between human agents and non-human components in processes of meaning-making as "intra-active" – a neologism introduced by the physicist and queer philosopher Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2012a, b). Intra-action challenges the assumption that material objects are contained, static, and stable formations whose fixed inner logic or inherent 'truth' causes determinable effects. According to Barad, who uses the perspective of quantum physics, neither objects nor subjects have boundaries before they come in contact with each other: rather, it is in their exchange in which they come to exist in the first place. Consequently, for Barad, agency is no property or intrinsic quality residing within either the material object or the human subject, but a distributed "enactment," unfolding in processes of engagement (2003: 826f).

_____ More than a decade into the material turn, this issue of FKW re-assesses the critical potential of material agentiality for audiovisual art in temporal terms. Though by no means a new field of inquiry, explorations of materiality, its ability to act, perform, and communicate, and its implicit politics, have been increasingly in demand in recent artistic and academic practices, as the large number of publications, conferences, and exhibitions on the subject demonstrates[4]. Dated formats meet this demand particularly well, since they allow for an experience of the material aspects of audiovisual art in a very direct way: they are able to guide a viewer's (and listener's, as Andy Birtwistle would insist) attention away from the content and to the carrier; highlighting the medium, the technology, and the particular surfaces and textures these material components afford (Marks 2002, Birtwistle 2011, Bruno 2014).

WHAT ARE THE "POLITICS" OF MATERIAL AGENTIALITY? _____
Queer feminist scholars arguing for a material turn have often

005

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Marietta Kesting

claimed the concept of agency to also include objects, things, animal and plant life, especially when breaking them down to their molecular, atomic, subatomic level: to waves, electrons, quarks, and so on.[5] Such a reconsideration obviously also affects – and possibly changes – concepts of the "political." After all, in modern Western political, philosophical, and sociological discourses, agency is strongly connected to (if not dependent on) the notion of the sovereign, human subject, or even the sovereign, human citizen (Meißner 2013). Perhaps this is part of the reason why Barad herself has never spoken of the "politics" of material agency, but instead of "ethics" of mattering, and why she keeps addressing questions of power as an "ethico-onto-epistemological issue," instead of a political one (2007, 2012a). We are aware that by insisting on "the political" as a term of central insterest in our exploration of material agentiality, we may maneuver ourselves into a cul-de-sac with incompatible terminologies. However, we are willing to take this risk, since we are also still committed to the "old," human-centered political aims and investments of gender and cultural studies. We share the concerns of thinkers like David Joselit, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Hal Foster, who have already mapped out some of the pitfalls in this discussion in the Winter 2016 issue of *October*: "Is it possible, or desirable, to decenter the human in discourse on art in particular? What is gained in the attempt and what – or who – disappears from view? Is human difference – gender, race, power of all kinds – elided? What are the risks in assigning agency to objects; does it absolve us of responsibility, or offer a new platform for politics?" (3). Similarly, the challenge in this volume was to come up with a concept of "the political" that would include the possible agentiality of non-human objects and matter, but also remain aware of the power relations that form, govern, and posit human subjectivities toward each other.

———— Polemically, one could state that there are simply no politics of material agentiality, since there is no "parliament of things" – at least not in the same way as there are parliaments of humans. However, one possible approach lies in following philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004), who defined the political as the viable sites where various orderings and social relations become "sensible," that is, preceptible via the (bodily) senses. These public realms are structured by materiality and affects, which are experienced and perceived, as well as performed, by humans. The political can thus be understood as a matter of intra-action: the (social, political) impact of an artwork is mediated through its material

006

dimensions, *while* perceived by human subjects. Meaning – as a site that affects power relations among humans – does not get inscribed into the artwork from outside, but constitutes itself while intra-acting with the work, and with the processes that make the work visible, audible, and tangible. Such understanding puts the focus of analysis on how the work's materiality distributes what is sensible for human viewers. As visual and environmental studies theorist Giuliana Bruno contends, this perception of materiality emphasizes the relationality of materials, how they connect to and interact with another, and with the realm of meaning and ideas.[6] Similarly, Bruno Latour defines the political in terms of our connections with and attachment to things that become public *matters*: "It's clear that each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. [...] Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. [...] In other words, objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of 'the political'" (2005: 5).

_____ The question of the political might thus need to be re-stated as: do politics of material agents exist, and what are, in the broadest sense, public matters and issues? What objects and materials do they entail, how can we recognize them and discuss them? Obviously, material objects do not cast a vote, they don't have representatives, even though some artists have recently challenged this idea (as for example Wang Yuyang who states that objects have rights too, and wants them to express themselves and be part of a 'democracy').[7] How can we as theorists, practitioners, and artists take this claim seriously, without resorting to an anthropocentric comparison, "humanizing" or cutifying objects, which at least to us seems like the opposite of what theories of new materialisms aim for?

TIME, MATERIALITY, HISTORICITY _____ Obviously, an agential conceptualization of materiality raises relevant questions about the dated textures and technologies in works such as Naumann's *Triangular Stories*: what exactly can an artwork's material dimensions do, which dynamics can they set off, and what perceptive and affective structures and realms of the sensible can they mobilize in an encounter with a human viewer and listener? When dated formats are summoned to tell historical stories – be they personal, national, or those concerning the medium itself – such redirection of attention also necessitates re-thinking theories of representation

007

by and through materiality. History is often thought of as acting *upon* matter, as inscribing itself in objects and technologies. Time, the dynamic force, altering matter, the inert being: we encounter such an understanding in the index, the faithful trace, the authentic documentary source, and other concepts describing (or rather: limiting) the ways material things are allowed to represent and signify in semiotic frameworks. In contrast, thinking matter as agential and able to engage with time and storytelling in an intra-active fashion allows us to grasp the multiplicity and diversity of relationships materializing in contemporary artistic practices today, which often strongly depend on non-linear, non-teleologic conceptions of time and history (cf. Kernbauer 2014). Barad highlights that new materialist approaches should pay careful attention to the performative qualites of temporality itself. In an intra-active understanding, time does not just pass, and history does not just amass behind the now. Instead, "time itself is constituted through the dynamics of intra-activity and the past remains open to material reconfigurings" (Barad 2007: 383). She stresses that if we understand "*matter ... [as] a doing, a congealing of agency*" (2003: 822, italics in original), material configurations are maximally contingent, and carry in them a call to consider all the different possibilities to enact and perform otherwise in the future.

_____ The contributions to this volume employ a similar understanding of historicity as materially entangled, when they show that untimely, outdated materialities warrant as much engagement with present and future states as they do with those of the past (Laura Marks), when they address how imagined, fantastic, fabricated histories too may materialize as tangible and physical (Henrike Naumann), when they unpack the complicated temporalities (and untimely utopian promises) at work within nostalgic 'retro' sensibilities (Gabriele Jutz), when they question the supposed immediate historical-representative properties of the sound of outdated techonologies (Andy Birtwistle), or when they discuss the very weight of objects as subject to changes by way of discursive shifts (Axel Stockburger & Kristina Pia Hofer). All contributions share an interest in tracing the *trajectories* of sounds and images in their materiality; their movement(s), and physical *and* political re-configurations, through space and time. All authors are invested in showing how aesthetics in their material manifestations – glitch, wear, artefacts, lossy compression, format incompatibilities, and format expansions – can communicate the historical and political circumstances in which sounds and images can travel, or be kept from moving.

008

INTRODUCTION // DATED FORMATS NOW: MATERIAL PRACTICES IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Marietta Kesting

——— Importantly, historicity – in this volume – also means putting 'new materialism' in a historical context instead of celebrating it as a completely new perspective. We share Jordana Rosenberg's concerns when she provocatively argues that "the urge towards objects comports itself in a very particular fashion, one that will be familiar to scholars of colonialism and settler-colonialism, and that calls to mind any number of New-World-style fantasies about locations unmediated by social order. The ontological turn [...] re-shapes an old paradigm, a primitivist fantasy that hinges on the violent erasure of the social: the conjuring of a realm – an 'ancestral realm' – that exists in the present, but in parallax to historical time. A *terra nullius* of the theoretical landscape" (Rosenberg 2014: 16). We thus pursue our interest in material entanglements in dated sound and video formats not to propagate a "turn," but much rather to trace how earlier understandings of the politics of sounds and images can, even must, continue anew, and be reconfigured, in recent materialist theoretical frames. We are interested in tracing how in the history of visual and sonic critique the endeavour of thinking intra-action by no means stands isolated and alone, but connects to the political issues that have driven feminist engage-ments with sound and video art for decades.

——— This volume substantially draws from discussions that took place in the framework of the workshop "What are the politics of material agentiality?" on April 22 and 23, 2016 at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, which was organized by Kristina Pia Hofer, Eva Kernbauer, and Marietta Kesting as part of the FWF project *A Matter of Historicity – Material Practices in Audiovisual Art.*[8] Looking at a range of artistic practices, from archival salvaging of precarious film and video material (Laura Marks) to appropri-ative re-workings of modernist sound art (Andy Birtwistle); from probing modernist concepts of medium specificity by deploying obsolete formats (Axel Stockburger in dialogue with Kristina Pia Hofer, Gabriele Jutz as respondent to Andy Birtwistle) to re-thin-king the museum and negotiating memory by restaging historically specific styles, fashion, and music cultures (Henrike Naumann), the contributors tried to trace the emancipatory, transgressive, utopian, finally political potential that they located in the use of dated formats. Most remarkably, the contributions to the work-shop, and this volume, do not often explicitly address gender poli-tics in their 'traditional' sense, which would strongly bind them to the categories of difference deployed in the formation of human subjectivities. Is this because gender, as a category, becomes less

010

INTRODUCTION // DATED FORMATS NOW: MATERIAL PRACTICES IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

meaningful when working with the materialities analyzed here? Or does moving the inquiry to the materiality of media and art works also mean moving beyond (human) genders? If so, there are still open questions about the intimate connection to the viewer's and listener's body and embodied responses suggested by many authors of new materialism, and also by the authors of this volume, especially Gabriele Jutz and Laura Marks.

"SUBJECTLESS" CRITIQUE? _____ The obvious trouble with integrating political categories in materialist inquiry mirrors the shift away from the subject to object ontologies and technologies that José Esteban Muñoz, Jack J. Halberstamm, and David Eng already proposed in 2005: "What might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent" (3). Gabriele Dietze, Beatrice Michaelis and Elahe Haschemi Yekanki, who rekindled the debate in Germany in 2012, explain this development as an attempt to re-think critical automatisms that assume – and deploy – categories of difference as relatively rigid, unchanging binaries (Dietze, Haschemi Yekani, and Michaelis 2012). Turning attention to relations between non-human materialities and human agents, they argue, could once again raise an awareness that human bodies and subjectivities, however and of course always gendered and racialized, are anything but fixed entities, but themselves unstable and shifting networks and aggregate states. In this way, feminist new materialism may have been a necesary new approach out of the stalemate of identity-based politics.

_____ However, subjects and subjectivities have not become completely meaningless. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (2016) cautioned recently that the widenening of queer studies' scope and the assumption that nature itself is inherently queer[9] may lead to ontologizing queerness itself, and relegates it to an originary, pre-human sphere outside of power structures and social relations. Similarly, Jordana Rosenberg has argued that object-ontologies and materialities run the risk of turning into myths of orgins and primordial, 'pure' relations that are untainted by humans – which, paradoxically, constitutes a perspective that gender and queer studies have always worked so hard to deconstruct. We therefore agree with Giuliana Bruno, who asserts that "a turn toward the material in the study of visual space enhances

011

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Marietta Kesting

the exploration of the phenomenal and the sensible worlds, [...] which configure the art object and mold its life in historicity. Such a way of approaching material practice does not exclude subjects and subjectivities but rather engages them" (2016: 14f). Thereby one can think of materiality as an active zone of encounter and admixture, a site of mediation and projection, memory and transformation (ibid.). So even if some of our contributors do not go into a detailed analysis of the subjectivities of producers and audiences, they are aware of their existence, while strategically foregrounding the material perspectives.

_____ Implicitly, the contributions to this volume follow up on a question central to many of the much-discussed publications of new (feminist) materialism:[10] Is there a different kind of (feminist) politics at work when approaching materiality? And what kind of different politics could this be? The contributions offer different trajectories and attempts to answer this question, from the modest claim of Birtwistle's argument in sound art's relation to material politics as listening to material noise, to Marks's attention to precarious audio-visual archives; from Jutz's engagement with the haptics of pixel visions's toy cameras, to Henrike Naumann's current work with interior design in Eastern Germany. Importantly, these positions share a concept of politics whose central point lies in *relinquishing power* – over material, over the meaning of an artwork, over the different ways into the historical stories an artwork may open up for different viewers and listeners. The contributions operationalize this question again and again as a question of agency, more precisely, in the question of what non-human agency – an agency of the material components of the sound and video pieces discussed, an agency not associated with the modern concept of the sovereign subject – could look, feel, sound like. The power Birtwistle, Jutz, Marks, and Stockburger see relinquished in the artworks they discuss essentially seems to be *authorial* power, the power to steer meaning by the human creator's intention. Of course, such an assumption is always tied up with the gendered dynamics that authorship – and especially artistic authorship – has been caught up in modernity and afterward; they still are today, even though this is no longer on the forefront of discussions in 2017. Almost as if looking for a contrast foil to such strong concepts of (artistic, authorial, finally male) agency, Birtwistle, Marks, and Jutz all suggest a weaker concept of politics: the gesture of surrender, sharing, and giving over, and, in Jutz's

012

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Marietta Kesting

article, the gesture of surrender to a *minor* aesthetics in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1986).

⎯⎯⎯ Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the minor seems an appropriate point of reference for a project that seeks to explore how artworks 'tell' historical stories intra-actively, that is, in processes where human and non-human meaning-making constitute each other. Though a concept seemingly preoccupied with the realm of words (a realm that Barad famously wants to decentralize),[11] the "minor literatures" Deleuze and Guattari draw from also question the authorial subject as a sovereign subject. In some aspects, their formulations appear similar to Barad's new-materialist notion of intra-active world-making: "In 'The Investigations of a Dog' the expressions of the solitary researcher tend toward the assemblage *(agencement)* of a collective enunciation of the canine species even if this collectivity is no longer or not yet given. There isn't a subject; *there are only collective assemblages of enunciation*" (1986: 18, emphasis in original). Deleuze and Guattari's investment in such a "collective assemblage of enunciations," and especially the interest in how aesthetics (and grammars) connect to politics in such assemblages, also resonates with a question raised by Axel Stockburger in this volume: "When commodities and objects are interpellated to communicate with us, we have to ask *which language* they will use (23)."[12] Asking for the multiple languages of objects and their material dimensions, instead of excluding language as a seemingly privileged site of inquiry, could also mark a case in point for thinking together representation and new materialist approaches for making sense of dated formats in contemporary artworks. It highlights one more time that what is at stake is not shifting importance from one dimension to the other, or excluding one dimension for the privilege of the other, but really to take seriously their related-ness, their entanglement, and the claim that the subjectivities and the things intra-acting constitute each other in processes of exchange.

// **Image Credits**
Fig.1: Henrike Naumann: *Triangular Stories* (2012). VHS, 2 channels, color, sound. Actors: Maximilian Klas, Janina Stopper, Michel Diercks (f.l.t.r.) Video still courtesy of the artist.

11)
As exemplified by the much-quoted opening statement for her 2003 article in *Signs* – "Language has been granted too much power" (801).

12)
Of course, the question remains how exactly "language" is to be conceptualized in such a shared and intra-active framework, and there will be more than one answer depending on the objects in question. The Frankfurt School (Adorno 1975), for instance, cautioned that commodity objects always already talked 'too much,' and framed object language as a bearer of capitalist ideology in their critical theory. On the other hand, post-structuralism and particularly Jacques Derrida (1976) emphasized that languages, too, are never transparent, and do not necessarily lead to understanding or fulfilling ideological goals. Moreover, critics from the field of cultural studies and visual culture have often reminded us that language, and in particular text, is a concept that is very open to include performative and material aspects of objects, sounds, and images (for instance, Barthes 1977; Hall 1997; Serres 2007; Sedgwick 2003). Laura Marks has addressed the question of "translation" of the multisensory experiences afforded by art to the practices of academic writing at length in her introduction to *Touch* (2002). For FKW, Sigrid Adorf and Maike Christadler have sketched out a number of approaches to sounding out possible interactions between language, affect, and materiality in the context of the linguistic and affective turns in issue 55 (2014).

013

// **Kristina Pia Hofer**
Marietta Kesting

// **References**

Adorf, Sigrid and Christadler, Maike (eds.) (2014): New Politics of Looking? Affekt und Repräsentation. Bremen: FKW Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur. Issue 55

Adorno, Theodor W. (1975): Negative Dialektik. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp

Barad, Karen (2003): Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter. In: Signs. Vol. 28, issue 3, pp. 801-831

Barad, Karen (2007): Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Barad, Karen (2012): Intra-Active Entanglements. An Interview with Karen Barad by Malou Juelskjær and Nete Schwennesen. In: Kvinder, Køn & Forskining. Vol. 1-2, 2012, pp. 10-23

Barad, Karen (2012): Nature's Queer Performativity. In: Kvinder, Køn & Forskining. Vol. 1-2, pp. 25-53

Barrett, Estelle and Bolt, Barbara (eds.) (2013): Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts. London and New York: i.b. Tauris

Barthes, Roland (1977): The Third Meaning: Research Notes on some Eisenstein Stills. trans. Stephen Heath. In: Image Music Text. London: Fontana Press, pp. 52-68

Benjamin, Walter (1999): Arcades Project. trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA, & London: Belknap

Braidotti, Rosi (2013): The Posthuman. Cambridge: Polity Press

Bruno, Giuliana (2014): Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Bruno, Giuliana (2016): A Questionnaire on Materialism. In: October. Issue 155, pp. 14-15

Coole, Diana and Frost, Samantha (eds.) (2010): The New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Cox, Christoph, Jaskey, Jenny and Malik, Suhail (eds.) (2015): Realism Materialism Art. Annadale-on-Hudson, NY and Berlin: Center for Curatorial Studies and Sternberg Press

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1986): Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Derrida, Jacques (1976): Of Grammatology. trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press

Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid (2016): Queere Ökologien gegen den Strich gebürstet. Lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich organized by cx center and the department of philosophy, Munich, Nov. 16th 2016. Publication forthcoming

Dietze, Gabriele, Haschemi Yekani, Elahe and Michaelis, Beatrice (2012): The Queerness of Things Not Queer: Entgrenzungen – Affekte und Materialitäten – Interventionen. In: Feministische Studien. Vol. 30, issue 2, pp. 184-197

Eng, David L., Halberstam, Jack J., and Muñoz, José Esteban (eds.) (2005): What's Queer about Queer Studies Now? In: Social Text 84-85, Vol. 23, issues 3-4, pp. 1-17

Hall, Stuart (1997): The Work of Representation. In: Hall, Stuart (ed.): Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices. London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi: Sage, pp. 13-64

Haraway, Donna (1987): A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. In: Australian Feminist Studies. Vol. 2, issue 4, pp. 1-42

Haraway, Donna (1988): Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives. In: Feminist Studies. Vol. 14, issue 3, pp. 575-599

Haraway, Donna (1997): Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan©Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience. London, New York: Routledge

Haraway, Donna (2003): The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press

Haraway, Donna (2016): Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Heidegger, Martin (2000) [1950]: Gesamtwerk, Band 7. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, pp. 165-188

Hekman, Susan (2010): The Material of Knowledge. Feminist Disclosures. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press

Joselit, David, Lambert-Beatty, Carry and Foster, Hal (eds.) (2016): A Questionnaire on Materialism. October. Issue 155

Kernbauer, Eva (2014): Visual Instruction. Historical Representation in Contemporary Art. In: Breitwieser, Sabine (ed.): Exhibition catalogue. Art/Histories. Museum der Moderne, Salzburg 2014. München: Hirmer pp. 22-41

Latour, Bruno (2005): From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public. In:

014

Latour, Bruno & Weibel, Peter (eds.): Exhibition catalogue. Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy. ZKM 2005. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 4-31

Marks, Laura U. (2002): Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media. Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press

Meißner, Hanna (2013): Feministische Gesellschaftskritik als onto-epistemo-logisches Projekt. In: Bath, Corinna/Meißner, Hanna/Trinkaus, Stephan/Völker, Susanne (eds.): Geschlechter Interferenzen. Wissensformen – Subjektivierungsweisen – Materialisierungen. Münster: LIT Verlag, pp. 163-208

Naumann, Henrike (ed.) (2014): Exhibition catalogue. The Effects Can Last Forever. Projektraum Flutgraben e.V. 2014. Berlin: Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt

Naumann, Henrike (2016): Unpublished interview by Marietta Kesting

Parisi, Luciana (2004): Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire. London & New York: Continuum Press

Rancière, Jacques (2004): The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible. trans. G. Rockhill. London & New York: Continuum

Rosenberg, Jordana (2014): The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present. In: Theory and Event. Vol. 17, issue 2, pp. 15-30

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (2003): Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Serres, Michel (2007) [1980]: The Parasite. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press Stakemeier, Kerstin and Witzgall, Susanne (eds.) (2014): Macht des Materials / Politik der Materialität. Zürich: diaphanes

This text was copy edited by Daniel Hendrickson.

015

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:
NEW MATERIALISM, OLD MEDIA

Kristina Pia Hofer: Axel, let me jump right into the topic with you: what is the significance of new materialist frameworks, and especially new feminist materialist frames, in the world of contemporary art? As is known, the recent materialist turn in feminist thinking is strongly influenced by a specific field in feminist theory, namely, by feminist science and technology studies (STS).[1] But as critics like Sara Ahmed have pointed out,[2] taking materialities seriously as components that influence social and political dynamics – and also the way that these dynamics are represented in public discourses – is not new within this specific field. The field already has a long history stretching right into the 1980s, where we have big names like Donna Haraway, for instance. Here, however, the interest in materiality targets very specific contexts, like the relation between medical technologies and the human, biological, anatomical body, or the "traffic," as Haraway calls it, between nature and culture that necessarily takes place in modern (techno-) science.[3] But I wonder how these lines of thinking impact upon the arts, the dynamics of which strike me as somewhat different.

Axel Stockburger: For me it was incredibly interesting to see that certain aspects of this perspective overlap with Deleuze and Guattari's work, especially with their notion of assemblage *(agencement)*.[4] It can also be found in the field of the critique of science, with actor-network theory, both Bruno Latour's and Isabelle Stengers's work, and then it seems to appear in lots of different guises in the last 10 years. While you are focusing on a particular feminist position, elements of new materialism simultaneously come to the fore with the rise of speculative realism and what corresponds to it in terms of object-oriented ontology. So my first question was what these different areas of thought share in relation to our subject. I think one crucial aspect is that they all focus on relationality. That's definitely something they all address in their own particular ways; they emphasize or focus on relations between a whole range of different entities and change the conceptual landscape insofar as they are keen to decenter human subjectivity by highlighting its embeddedness in complex assemblages with other entities. We can also find this in Karen Barad's or in Bruno Latour's perspective. A second shared element appears to be the focus on the unstable, the dynamic and the fluid, which

1)
See, for instance, Barad, Karen (2007): Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press; Coole, Diana and Frost, Samantha (2010): New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

2)
Ahmed, Sara (2008): Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the "New Materialism." In: European Journal of Women's Studies. Vol. 15, issue 1, pp. 23-39.

3)
Haraway, Donna (1989): Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science. London, New York: Routledge, p. 377.

4)
See: Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix (1980): A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

// **Kristina Pia Hofer**
Axel Stockburger

appears time and again. In the world of quantum physics, matter has lost its air of stability and inertness. In a certain sense one is reminded of the scientific metaphor of the "aether," 5) which was considered such an important medium in nineteenth century science. I am thinking of this because a lot of the language in new materialist perspectives metaphorically points towards the fluid and dynamic: that which is *in-between*.

KPH: (laughs) Sure, on the one hand one is reminded of historical scientific concepts like aether – the idea that there is sort of an intangible fluid connecting all the different natural, human and divine components interacting in processes of world-making. After all, the concern most new materialist accounts share is pointing out the ways different components – animate and inanimate, cultural and natural, organic and inorganic, human and other – are in fact entangled, and interacting with each other in all phenomena that constitute our empirical world. On the other hand, what present materialisms are invested in is not just describing such fluidity, or defining a missing element connecting the different actors in the world, but rather in redefining the notion of the agent or actor itself. The common notion of an agent – in Western thought since at least the Enlightenment – would be to posit the agent as a person, a subject imbued with a consciousness, a will and a power to act. Karen Barad expands upon this notion of the agent, and suggests agency as something that can be asserted by everything that has a presence in particular phenomena in the empiricial world – ranging from sea creatures like the brittle star to lab equipment, for example.

AS: Of course, the aim of these positions is to a certain extent to deconstruct, to open up, or to transform a very specific conception of dualism between spirit and matter, which can be found at the core of Western forms of subject constitution: the Cartesian subject with its distinction between mind/spirit and body/matter, or Kant's political subject that emerges during the Enlightenment. In this tradition, subject formation and political thought are always based on practices of distinction, classification and exclusion. The introduction of universal laws for political subjects is based on these modes of separation. A critical approach towards these forms of splitting domains, of defining binaries, of keeping matter and mind in separate spheres, is present in all flavors of new materialism.

KPH: Talking about dismantling binaries: this has been a crucial concern in all sorts of feminist approaches to art and popular culture for many decades now. Feminist film studies, for instance,

017

// **Kristina Pia Hofer**
Axel Stockburger

has been enormously invested in laying bare how such binaries are staged, performed and reified in the cinema – cinema in the broad sense of the term, which includes the film as a semiotic text as well as the theater as a social, architectural space, and also the apparatus as a physical assemblage of technologies. Not to forget the filmmakers/audiences/stars as social agents. In my experience, trying to discuss new materialist ideas in these contexts can run the risk of being misunderstood as deliberate provocation. I am often asked what, exactly, is so very new about calling attention to the role that material components, like the sonic texture of a particular copy of a late 1960s exploitation film, play in dynamics of meaning-making.[6] I am often told that the binaries I seek to dismantle have all been sufficienty addressed before. At the same time, in such critical contexts, putting material, non-human, non-social components center stage seems almost beside the point: after all, films, just like art objects in a more general sense, are objects that gain meaning only from their embeddedness and circulation within the human, social world; they are produced for human consumption. Do you have similar experiences in the field of contemporary art? What happens when we lavish attention on non-human components to enrich existing concepts of representation? Do we act against our better knowledge, namely, that representation, in its very core, is of the human world? And do we give up the very subject at stake in the politics of representation, namely, addressing the inequality and injustice of how marginalized human agents are represented as non-human or less than human in dominant visual cultures – as, for instance, could be argued with Stuart Hall, Jack Halberstam or Judith Butler?

AS: Before I try to think about concrete examples in art I would like to address the issue you just raised, namely that you are sceptical of putting material subjects center stage, to treat them like human subjects. I think it is crucial to think about the differences between for example Butler's attack on binary formations and that of Karen Barad. Butler addresses the problem within the framework of post-structuralist thought and in the sphere of philosphy and language. Her approach allows for a multiplication of potential identity formations or subject potentials since it focuses on the performative dimension of these processes. Barad takes this approach and introduces it to the world of quantum physics, engaging with the sub-particle exchanges and flows that give rise to material phenomena. She proposes conceiving them as discursive formations – yet, importantly, not in the sense of language, but in

018

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Axel Stockburger

7)
Robinson, Walter (2014): Flipping
and the Rise of Zombie Formalism.
In: artspace magazine,
http://www.artspace.com/magazine/
contributors/see_here/the_rise_
of_zombie_formalism-52184, last
accessed July 5, 2016.

the sense that boundary formations emerge from interactions, and in turn become the preconditions for new ones. This conception is radically context-dependent, and introduces an enormous level of situational complexity into the proceedings. Its radicality emerges precisely from the conceptual import of the deconstruction of binary formations on the order of language and culture, into the quantum order of physical materiality.

KPH: Let's take a step back from Barad and the framework of STS feminism, and return to my earlier question about object-centered thinking in contexts that are very much dominated by human agency, like the art world, or, more precisely, present-day art markets. It is interesting how matter-oriented frames other than new materialist feminisms, especially object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, are quite effectively incorporated in current market rhetorics. The Salon program that accompanied Art Basel Hong Kong 2016, for instance, hosted an evening of panel discussions on "New Materialities" and "The Post Human Condition," where artists, critics and curators debated the possible agentiality, vibrancy, liveliness of artworks – and this in the context of a huge trade fair, which is predominately about human agents moving artworks for large sums of money. In your opinion, what is the value, the function of such theories in such a setting?

AS: I think that you can take a very simple, slightly superficial approach to this, and just look at it as artists being allowed simply to produce singular objects again, which are much easier to trade in markets, a phenomenon that has been referred to as Zombie Formalism by critics such as Walter Robinson.[7] So from the perspective of somebody who works in so-called media art, this might even appear as a kind of backlash – a drive towards decomplexification and depoliticization. In any case, at present, traditional forms of art, such as sculpture and painting, have again become increasingly important in the global art market. During the phase of financial capitalism the speculation with art assets has continuously intensified. However, as I said, this is what appears on the surface and I think there are clearly additional reasons for the interest in new materialism displayed by the art world. From my personal practice as an artist in the 1990s, I remember the conception of a trend towards dematerialization, particularly in connection with digital technologies, that was detected and criticized during that time. Many of the theories of dematerialization or even "fractalization" by thinkers like Lyotard or Baudrillard reinforced the perceived separation between the material world

019

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Axel Stockburger

and the world of signs. If you followed Baudrillard,[8] who was very important for some artists during this time, you were concerned with a kind of decoupling between material reality and the world of signs and models, or as Baudrillard called it, "hyperreality." The important point was that they all pointed towards a kind of rupture, a movement from "real space" into cyberspace, and in this sense they kept hanging on to binary models of the separation between matter and spirit, now translated into matter and digital realm. There was a lot of talk about the vanishing of the body as an effect of digital technologies. Today I believe that this fear of losing the body in immaterial worlds is something we have moved through and done away with. And this might also have to do with slowly beginning to develop a different reading of the digital transformation, and how it affects our world. It hasn't just sucked out the (material) world into an invisible realm of data. On the contrary, it has completely rearranged almost all of the relations between different entities and amalgamations of them. In this sense it has not removed anything, but enriched the relations between different actors and phenomena. This becomes very evident in the field of logistics, for example. There is a very real, physical reorganization of processes of transporting material things and commodities happening on the basis of these so-called immaterial technologies.

8)
Baudrillard, Jean (1994): Simulacra and Simulation. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

9)
Parikka, Jussi (2015): A Geology of Media. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

10)
For example: Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational*. MOV File, 2013; *Factory of the Sun*. Video installation, 2016.

And I think with realizations such as these emerges a renewed interest in the material basis of information technologies themselves. For example, the interest researchers like Jussi Parikka[9] have in the material, geological basis of communications technology. Of course, this interest opens up the economical and political dimensions of these technologies – from issues such as increased automatization, cheap labour in Chinese phone factories, the coltan wars in Central Africa, the immense amounts of power necessary for the upkeep of data centers and so on. In the art world, people like Hito Steyerl[10] address some of these issues by highlighting the material and political dimensions of contemporary communication technologies.

// Figure 1
Axel Stockburger: No Ghost Just a Shell (After Pierre Huyghe) (2012). C-Print.

020

KPH: Actually, this could be one way to address the "politics" in the title of our workshop. This, then, is an "old" concept of politics. Because when we are asking where the coltan in our phones comes from, and where – and under which conditions – those phones are assembled, we are asking about the exploitation of workers and resources. At the same time, it connects to a post-colonial conception of politics, as it asks about how the Global North profits from the exploitation of workers and resources of the Global South. In a way, new materialist theorizing can be "retro" in its own right: it can be reminiscent of Marxist materialism in the sense that it can lead to questions about who owns the means of production, and who gets paid for what exactly.

AS: I think there are a lot of reasons to think about that and not to throw materialist approaches that appear to be "retro" out of the window completely.

KPH: Absolutely, but the way object-oriented thinking appears on art markets today does not necessarily address materiality in this sense. Let me return to an example from Art Basel Hong Kong 2016. In the panel discussion on "The Post Human Condition," the central piece debated was an installation of Wang Yuyang's, in which the artist manipulated books to make them appear as if they were breathing, their covers softly heaving up and down like a human (or animal) body inhaling and exhaling. Here, thinking materially did not entail questioning under which – possibly problematic, possibly injust – conditions the material setup for the production and circulation of art in the specific context of a large international fair are assembled. Rather, objects were championed as living, breathing beings – imbued with life *akin* to those of humans. Wang posited that his piece was critical insofar as it wanted to raise the question if objects – as living things – had rights. I must admit I was a little disturbed by this. First, I did not quite see the "post human" quality of the installation, which after all animated objects by bestowing characteristics of organic life – breathing – upon them. Second, I feel that suggesting objects had "rights" is a way of further humanizing discourses on materiality – as I understand it, historically, the notion of rights is intimately tied to the notion of the sovereign subject. Does that mean that objects should obtain subject status in Wang's art? If that's the case, I don't see how it calls into question the binaries we have discussed earlier today.

AS: When we talk about "rights," one right that immediately comes to mind is the question of ownership and the set of rights regarding

021

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Axel Stockburger

11)
Ostrom, Elinor (1990): Governing
the Commons: The Evolution of
Institutions for Collective Action.
Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press.

property that guarantee it. Where does this idea to own a thing essentially originate? This is an issue we inherited from Roman law, and it is thus historically contingent. What is relevant in this context was the conception that the "dominium" (ownership, title, property) afforded absolute rights over particular material entities up to their consumption or destruction, to a specific kind of Roman citizen, the predominantly male "dominus," the master of the house. Many previous arrangements regulated access to material objects or land based on a whole range of different rights of use, exercised by different subjects or communities. In this sense, throughout history there have existed many examples where the use of resources, things, objects is regulated outside of this particular idea of absolute ownership over substance and physical materiality. So for me this would be one way of reinterpreting or rethinking subject-object relationships, because it shows that what is crucial in this context is not to give up the subject, but to develop different forms of relations between subjects and objects. One novel approach to this question was addressed in the current resurgence of the conception of the commons.[11] Here the issue is how to develop layered systems of engagement, participation and use of the material world. Such a layered approach also enables us to develop an ecologically adequate form of thinking about the rights of non-human actors, like natural resources, animals and so on, in balance with that of other agents forming part of a system.

KPH: I am just always uneasy about delving into speculations about how our understanding of concepts like rights – or in that case, agency – could be expanded to include inorganic components like paper, ink and cardboard, while the actual execution of rights in the traditional sense – in the sense that they govern societies – still have a hard time recognizing actual people and human populations as deserving subjects. I am thinking of how Europe de-humanizes refugees by calling their movements "waves" or "floods," as if they were a destructive natural force beyond reason, set on hitting the Global North without motivation, and completely unjustified.

AS: You are right about this perception of strategic dehumanization undertaken by the political right and the media – turning people into natural phenomena. However, this is not a new phenomenon at all, and has to be addressed as such. And still, while this is happening, we are also witnessing a technological transformation that literally makes formerly inanimate things "speak." With developments like the Internet of Things, there already exists a

022

logic that makes objects speak within the world of the economy of global logistics. RFID tags allow for continuous territorial calls, a bit like birds' songs, marking territories, space, location. When commodities and objects are interpellated to communicate with us, we have to ask which language they will use. Or, in other words, how can we escape a grammar that is entirely scripted by late capitalism, centered on property rights and closed algorithmic environments?

KPH: Of course, inquiring into the language of objects raises the question of ethics again. As I understand it, one of the big assets of semiotic and language-based discursive approaches to the politics of representation was actually to dislodge the meaning from the substrate of a thing – to demonstrate convincingly that artefacts (and 'natural' things, for that) are infused with meaning by their political environment, by the social contexts they circulate in. This is emancipatory because it allows sets of rhetorics to be dismantled – like in the audiovisual language of cinema, which in its mainstream incarnation essentializes and naturalizes difference. I am thinking of images we understand as sexist, racist and so on. Taking this into consideration, do new materialist approaches run the risk of undermining the emancipatory politics of language-based projects? How can the idea that a thing, or its material substrate, can actually transport meaning in its own right integrate with these more traditional emancipatory politics? I guess this is where entanglement becomes important again – to highlight how meaning forms from and within the interconnection and exchange between human and non-human dimensions, instead of: meaning being produced by either the human or the thing, in isolation, and by themselves alone.

AS: I think it should not be a question of a simple swapping of positions, by instilling a "classic" notion of subjectivity in things, which might lead to an echo of magical worldviews, where everything is enchanted or can be possessed by spirits or demons. In other words, if this approach leads to an anthropomorphization of everything, I believe we will not be able to integrate it with traditional emancipatory politics, because the problem started precisely with a stance of human ignorance in relation to the world.

———— We are already confronted with contingent dynamic formations that involve matter in all its forms – human, animal, inorganic, machinic – "assemblages" if you want to use Deleuze and Guattari's term. A first step is to accept these entangled forms and to try to understand their configurations. I guess the crucial question is

023

to ask which desires, protocols or ideological formations give rise to these configurations, and then to focus on the relations between those elements. When you address the issue of the production of meaning, one could also ask how complex systems produce "meanings," which become input for automated, scripted reactions acted upon by other machinic assemblages. The phenomenon of high frequency trading in finance is such an example: a certain kind of meaning is produced, which is acted upon by automated systems according to rules produced by human agents, but on a timescale that is not directly accessible to human actors anymore, with effects on all kinds of possible entities, and most importantly with a high degree of contingency. I am convinced that this is also an important field for artists to intervene in – to establish meaningful encounters between subjective intentionality and contingency.

KPH: Let's stay with contingency for a bit, as it brings us back to questions of historicity, and of working with dated formats. When preparing this workshop, we spent considerable time trying to untangle the different temporalities at work when artists employ dated technologies in their present-day practice. Dated technologies are technologies that are not state-of-the-art today, but certainly were at another time – like certain analog video formats, for instance. Artistic practices actively seek out engagement with such technologies for many different reasons, ranging from being motivated by nostalgia, to simply grabbing the first, cheapest piece of gear that might be available or accessible. As a video artist, can you share some thoughts about the generational dynamics of video, and how these dynamics impinge on your practice?

AS: Well, I have been working with video for almost 20 years, and have witnessed a number of technological transformations. I have used different devices and formats, from analog U-matic, S-Video and VHS formats to digital formats, from SD over HD to 4K video. The storage devices became smaller and smaller, while the image resolution increased and literally changed its nature with the transition from analog towards digital forms of registration, storage and dissemination. As an artist, you are confronted with the problem of choosing a format or device that you can work with for as long as possible, due to economical factors as well as the learning curve for new technologies. Furthermore, the issue of formats is also a social issue to a certain extent, since you are always dealing with others, whether during the production or the reception of your work. For example, I remember working with a particular camera set up for a period of time at the end of the 1990s that

024

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Axel Stockburger

I was quite happy with and I was sad when new formats took over. A lot of the discussion with colleagues is dedicated to identifying devices and practices that will be "future-proof" to a certain extent – that you can work with for a relatively long period. I think this is an important issue because a lot of these devices have their own program, not only because many are made for consumer markets, but simply because every format has ist own specific affordances which are pre-coded in the hardware and software. I think with Vilém Flusser [12] that to be an artist also means to investigate this coding, and to attempt to work against the program of the device.

KPH: I think it is a fascinating idea, to be looking for a format which is future-proof. Maybe this desire, in a nutshell, explains the appeal of working with dated formats. In present-day popular music production, for instance, and especially in the independent sector, a large number of artists seem to just love working with old gear, analog gear, vintage gear. Is this because those apparatusses appear future-proof in a way? With such formats, you know what to expect, you know what the limits are, they won't change that much anymore because they're off the market in a way. On the other hand, some of those formats also seem future-proof in a negative sense: there literally seems to be no future for them, as they no longer evolve or adapt according to present practices of consumption. Vinyl record pressing plants are a good example. They are future-proof in the sense that some of them have survived the transition to digital storage formats, and they continue to provide artists and collectors with a format of a certain longevity, that, over the past decades, has seen very few changes in the way it works, technically speaking. Future-proof here means that the format will probably last. At the same time, however, pressing plants are future-proof because they are relics. Only a handful of operating plants are left in Europe, and they are aging rapidly. Since they are leftovers from a different era of music production, the technology they depend on is no longer produced, and if components break, they might be hard to replace – you might have to find a "vintage" component, if you will. Also, the people who know how to maintain the machinery are literally passing on, too. If market demands change, this aging, out-dated infrastructure is unable to adapt. See the current debate on the growing market for vinyl records, and the massive backlog at the few remaining pressing plants many artists feel this development has caused. So, there is an interesting tension to being future-proof. What is attractive about it for you?

025

AS: I think it is essentially an economic question. How often can you afford to buy a new device and how long will you then be able to work with it? And the same question emerges in the case of outmoded formats, since in many cases the outdated media will be much more expensive, since there is no mass market for it anymore. A telling example was the return of Polaroid that many photographers were interested in. The films became quite expensive in comparison to their heyday in the past. If you want to engage in this practice now, you have to pay to become part of the select group of connoisseurs in this format or medium.

KPH: Speaking about formats being resuscitated: in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*,[13] Rosalind Krauss suggests that outmoded media formats harbor a certain utopian potential; a potential that is arguably released when artists integrate such dated formats in contemporary practice. In Krauss's account, such utopian potential crucially hinges on a format's true obsolescence: it has to be off the market for good, and devoid of its value as a commodity. When thinking of examples like vinyl records or Polaroid film: are these formats at all obsolete, in Krauss's sense? After all, both records and Polaroid technology have successfully re-entered niche markets, with "original" gear and releases often selling for twenty times their former retail price. Instead of seeing the release of a utopian potential, we are looking at the same old cycle of commodities being exchanged for money.

AS: I absolutely agree with you. It is indeed interesting that outmoded or outdated media technologies have such a strong foothold in the field of art. And I think one of the reasons for this might be that the devices themselves take on an aesthetic dimension once they have become obsolete for a mass market. I teach at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and a lot of our video students are very interested in the classic video cubes, like the Hantarex. I think this has to do with the fact that they formally represent "classic" video art for them. When I asked them about it, many answered that this was the case, but others added that they were interested in the "sculptural dimension" too. Certain contemporary artists have also decided to focus on the sculptural and aesthetic dimension of present day LCD monitors, such as for example Simon Denny, who uses Samsung devices. There are, however, others who treat these devices as "neutral" – for them, the image reproduction device does not matter as such. Personally, I am more interested in allowing a video to flow though all kinds of

026

// Kristina Pia Hofer
Axel Stockburger

different forms of "re-performances", if you want to call it that. For me this is actually a specific strength of digital technologies – that they break medium specificity in this sense, and open up towards a huge range of potential devices and contexts of reception.

KPH: What do you mean by "re-performance"?

AS: Imagine this: You have a digital piece of art and if you allow it to enter the Internet you lose any control over which device it will be displayed on. In this sense the piece will be re-perfomed each time from a digital code according to the display device, which affects its materialization: you might watch it on your laptop or a small mobile device, or somebody might project it with a video projector. Another thing that comes to mind in this context is the relationship between original and copy. A few years ago Byung-Chul Han published a book about Shanzhai [14] – where he contrasts Eastern ways of thinking about the original and the authentic with the contemporary Western logic of material identity. Just to give you a little example: currently, we have this idea of archeology where a site becomes authentic because the same sto-

// Figure 2
Axel Stockburger: No Ghost Just a Shell
(After Pierre Huyghe) (2012). C-Print.

nes have been in place for hundreds and thousands of years. In contrast to that, Japanese temples are rebuilt continuously, following a program, yet they are precisely not regarded as inauthentic.

_____This understanding of authenticity was also dominant in the West until modern conceptions of originality, creation and history emerged in the seventeenth century, introducing a different perspective. Considering this change might help us understand the extent to which identity and authenticity have become entangled with the dimension of physical materiality in the Western tradition. This conception of identity appears to be highly artificial when you confront it with organic principles of reproduction, such as for example the growth of plants.

KPH: Notions of authenticity are, of course, strongly charged with emotion. In general, there has been a huge body of critical work, but also art works, that deals with both historicity and materiality

027

in terms of desire. Nostalgia as a key term comes to mind, as does, for the context of popular culture, "retromania."[15] What's up with that charge? How do you experience it in your work? How do you experience it teaching your students? You already mentioned the video cubes. Is there desire at work as well? It can't just be all about convention … but maybe I'm wrong?

AS: Yes, of course there is desire at work. The question is how this desire comes about. I believe that desire is an effect of distance. And what is the distance at stake in this context? Some of the obsolete technologies we spoke about are distanced in time. Some of these devices and objects almost become fetishes of sorts. And if you take this thought further, the kind of distance that is produced qua fetish could potentially allow the reintroduction of critique, albeit in the classic sense; critique that is possible because an object of critique is generated via the introduction of distance. So where did the concept of the fetish originate? It initially appeared in a post-colonial setting, where Western observers described the specific relationships between certain objects and the special powers that where ascribed to them in various animistic traditions as fetishistic. Western observers, rooted in their version of the scientific, regarded these world-views as primitive and naive. But clearly they overlap strongly with the way artists perceive and live their relationships with things and objects – where they talk to them as if they were alive and so on. Another route into the question of the fetish in art leads through the market and the idea of scarcity. Art in its commodity form is a luxury good, something that needs to be scarce. Obsolete technologies turn into antiques or scarce goods over time. In this sense I believe many artists, whether consciously or subconsciously, employ these outmoded, now relatively scarce objects in order to heighten the uniqueness and perceived singularity of their works.

————This represents a return to the classic logic of art production, where the most direct way to commodify a work of art is through material scarcity and the material uniqueness of the work of art. At the same time, many of the artist brands that currently dominate the global market for contemporary art preside over large studios with many employees and depend on industrial production logistics. I am convinced that a simplified reading of the theoretical approaches grouped under "new materialism" in the context of artistic production has lead to a renewal of fetishistic fascination with the materials used in art, while the critical potential of these theories is often overlooked or even dismissed.

028

For example, one of the most resistant constructions in the field of art, namely that of authorship, could possibly be approached differently if one were to take the "agentiality" of non-human entities into account. After all, new materialism seems to offer a way to re-evaluate the complex relationships between all those different entities. In this sense, it could be useful for the project of re-thinking the dominant systems that structure the field of contemporary art, which are still to a large degree characterized by the myth of the independent and autonomous male genius of creation. In this sense, new forms of collaborative authorship, which highlight the value of all the entities contributing to the emergence of works of art, would be an interesting outcome of a deeper engagement with new materialism. If we take this thought further we have to ask if the notion of authorship should be widened in order to include non-human actors.

KPH: But how will those actors get paid? (Audience laughs)

AS: How will we get beyond pay? Will we ever get beyond the dominance of the economic? I don't know, but just like the numerous externalities of capitalist economic operations that have to be addressed, this amounts to an issue of respect for all the agents, human and non-human, that are involved in making art.

// About the Authors
Kristina Pia Hofer is a researcher with the Austrian Science Fund funded project *A Matter of Historicity. Material Practices in Audiovisual Art* (FWF: P 27877-G26) at the Department of Art History, University of Applied Arts Vienna.
Axel Stockburger is an artist and theorist who currently works as assistant professor at the Department for Art and Digital Media at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. http://www.stockburger.at

ARCHIVAL ROMANCES: FOUND, COMPRESSED, AND LOVED AGAIN

Images have a life cycle that is material, social, and imaginative. Images' materiality constitutes an everyday problem in poorly infrastructured countries, but, as several listeners at "What are the Politics of Material Agentiality?" pointed out, even in wealthy countries there are plenty of media users who fall off the grid. In the work of Arab media artists I study, images' material trajectories are especially evident. Analog demagnetization and lossy digital compression; glitch, error, and artifacts introduced by compression; and layers of formatting draw attention to the trajectories and life cycles of images. Since all these artists are working with a contemporary matrix-based medium, the pixel or raster based electronic screen, I will also show the deep history of images' transformative life cycle in another matrix-based, algorithmic medium: carpets. Like others in places where official image archives are difficult to access, artists value glitch, error, and loss of resolution not only for their own aesthetic interest but also as indications of the labor of love required to access the past. I'll look at Arab media artists who painstakingly amass VHS collections of popular movies and TV shows, in archives that augment in care while they diminish in quality. Other artists draw attention to the new meanings that attach to anonymous images as they travel online, finally to be embraced by the recipient. For Arab media artists, like others in poor countries, every artifact in the archive is precious, even if it is distorted and noisy. At the end I'll explain my concept of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, to give a sense of how we can unfold compressed and noisy images to get a sense of their travels.[1]

⎯⎯The proposal for this excellent workshop stated, "In this workshop we will explicitly ask for the emancipatory, transgressive, utopian potential of material agentiality: What exactly can an artwork's material dimensions do, which dynamics can they set off, what structures can they move in an encounter with a human beholder?" Enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, the theory and method I propose, argues that media works make an intimate connection to the beholder's body and embodied responses, and that this personal reception completes the travels of the archival image. Like my theory of haptic visuality, enfolding-unfolding aesthetics is an implicitly feminist theory, in that it values the material labor

030

of embodied reception as a way of being open to the unknown without seeking to master it. Like that theory, enfolding-unfolding aesthetics does not ascribe these capacities only to female spectators; rather, their utopian potential lies in the way all spectators can engage with the world in this manner.

CONVERGENCE: AN IDEOLOGY OF IMMATERIALITY _____ "Media convergence" can be defined as the way digital platforms minimize differences between media at the levels of production, distribution, consumption: e.g. film, video, photography, sound recording. Early on, some media scholars trumpeted the immateriality of digital media, as when Friedrich Kittler wrote in 1999: "a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium." Many media scholars have retreated from the notion that digital media are immaterial, but the idea that convergence is a possible and desirable goal lingers on and must be critiqued. The notion that digital platforms remediate all former media into one mega-platform, and that they can transcend their materiality is a techno-deterministic ideology that upholds the ideal platform as the norm. It elides the vast variety of actual media practices.

_____ In error theory based in computer practice in the overdeveloped countries, error is celebrated in opposition to the control society (Nunes 2011). Glitch as an aesthetics of failure, as theorized by musician Kim Cascone in 2002 and others since, constitute a materialist critique and critique of totalizing systems. Noise, error, glitch are "counterprotocological" in Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker's sense (2007). Errors recognized by programs, e.g. "404 Not Found," are failures subsumed in successful operation of a closed system; all-actualizing errors. But as Nunes points out, uncaptured error refuses to signify, disrupts "cybernetic regime of efficiency and maximum performance" (2011: 13-14).

_____ This abject materiality is salutary in places where the transcendental ideology of convergence is strong. But in unevenly developed countries, like most of the Arab world, control via computers isn't the same issue. Surveillance is more heavy-handed and physical; reminders that computer platforms and networks are prone to error elicits a big "Duh!" People making do with obsolete and bootleg software and hardware; people who rely on internet cafés; those who are in the middle of uploading downloading, or rendering a video when a power cut strikes: they are well aware that glitch and error are the norm.

_____ For people making and using media technologies in poor

031

countries, the myth of platform transparency comes crashing down. Slightly obsolete, second-hand, and unsupported by customer service, media technologies in poor countries require constant care and maintenance (Larkin 2008). People using second-hand media technologies take as normal the breakdowns, incompatibilities, and long periods of waiting that people in wealthy countries are taught to reject. In this way the poor-tech users have a more materially accurate understanding of media tech in general.

MATERIALITIES OF LOW RESOLUTION, COMPRESSION, MOIRÉ, AND GLITCH _____ As electronic images travel, they suffer, and this suffering is visible in low resolution, compression, moiré, and glitch. All of these draw attention to the materiality of the support underlying the digital image. Analog video, copied in multiple generations, loses resolution and color accuracy, becoming a pastel blur – an effect some people are quite nostalgic for now. But digital images also lose resolution when they are reproduced, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Resolution diminishes when video is transferred from one system to another, for example from PAL to NTSC. Low resolution shows up when movies shot with consumer equipment or mobile phones are screened on platforms for high-definition video.

_____ Low resolution also occurs because digital media use compression algorithms, to allow images to be transmitted and reproduced more efficiently. Compression algorithms or codecs try to get the best resolution for a given bit-rate; if the bit-rate is low, the image will be more approximate. Compression is an economical way to store and reproduce data by omitting superfluous detail. It is the norm in poor countries where bootlegging is common and bandwidth is slow, but it affects traveling images everywhere in the world. A compressed image loses the depth and quality of the original. Often it exaggerates features that were negligible in the original.

_____ Moiré patterns result when two matrices that don't match up are superimposed, as when an image made in one resolution is imported into another resolution. Where their lines cross, a distracting interference between the matrices emerges. The interference creates a shimmering pattern that is often more interesting than the original image (this thinking is inspired by Egyptian digital artist Kareem Lotfy, Marks 2015: 268-269). Politically, we can observe moiré patterns when two different systems are superimposed. For example, when a colonial government gives way to

032

a national government, the moiré pattern is the interference between their two bureaucracies. The interference produces artifacts that draw more attention than either of their functions.

⎯⎯⎯ Last, glitch is the surge of the disorderly world into the orderly transmission of electronic signals, resulting from a sudden change in voltage in an electrical circuit. Ideally transmission is perfect, but in fact it almost never is. Rainbow colors flare across the pixel screen and weird colorful boxes pop up. Glitch reminds us of the analog roots of digital information, in the disorderly behavior of electrons.

COMPRESSION: POLITICS, MATERIALITY, AESTHETICS

⎯⎯⎯ You have probably witnessed the ugly artifacts in many a hastily made transfer from film to digital video, or in the compression of digital video into a smaller file that transfers more quickly. Smooth gradations of tone in the background of a shot transform into chunky halos. Many compression codecs appear to select for edges, in an anti-haptic tactic that assumes most viewers want to see a clear distinction between figure and ground. The result is a halo of edgelike artifacts that shimmer around a figure, filling the space like a swarm of gnats.

⎯⎯⎯ Compression draws attention to conventions of codecs, compression algorithms that make aesthetic choices for us. Jonathan Sterne relates that in 1990-91 the MPEG (Motion Picture Experts Group) consortium auditioned codecs for expert listeners. "Through MPEG's listening tests, expert listeners came to represent, in code, an anticipated future listening public" (2012: 25). A compressed image draws attention to these decisions made on a viewer's behalf by others, in a kind of digital-aesthetic neoimperialism.

⎯⎯⎯ Nunes points out that if we look to compression's roots in information theory, we discover an interesting relationship between compression and freedom. Information theory measures information, not meaning or knowledge. As Claude Shannon wrote in his field-founding 1948 article, "Information is a measure of one's freedom of choice when one selects a message." Too much freedom is bad, in this scenario, because the message doesn't get through. Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*, drawing on Shannon and Weaver, distinguishes between actual (message sent) and virtual (possible messages received). Eco argued that communication reduces potential in desire to maximize signal, while poetics generates potential by sustaining the equivocation of the text (Nunes 2011).

033

_____In information theory, freedom equals noise, too much virtuality. Compression reduces freedom, by transmitting the information that most receivers want. For sure most audiences want that information, not glitch and error that results from electronic flares and spikes. It's a poor comfort to someone watching a bad bootleg, or downloading lo-res media bristling with unintended artifacts, that they are more in touch with the materiality of the infrastructure. They may lose the meaning; but they might make poetry out of the distorted signal.

A DEEP HISTORY OF MATRIX-BASED MEDIA _____ Textiles, the earliest algorithmic artworks, offer interesting precedents for loss of resolution, compression, moiré, and glitch in a matrix-based medium. Weavers are skilled at managing image resolution for different pixel grids. As an example, let's look at the travels of the dragon motif on carpets. The dragon and phoenix motif traveled west from China at least twice: after the Mongol invasions of Islamic lands in the mid-thirteenth century, and during the Mongol-influenced Ilkhanid and Timurid reigns. While the Chinese prototype is very long and sinuous, Safavid painters who designed the carpet patterns adapted the creature, making it a little shorter and less fluid. Among the animals in combat on the Kashan animal carpet woven in the second half of the sixteenth century, now at the Metropolitan Museum (there's a similar fragment at the MAK in Vienna, **fig.1**), for example, a shapely, large-eyed green dragon, with yellow spots and three visible tendrils, curves entirely around an ass and bites its neck. By the time dragons appear on early Caucasian carpets, such as this one at the MAK, they retain the spots, tendrils, bug eyes and twisting body of the Chinese-Persian dragon, but their bodies are angular abstractions. Sometimes the dragon does battle with an equally abstracted phoenix; sometimes it is hard to tell (Marks 2010: 305-313).

_____Compression is one factor in the distortion of the dragon as it moves from Chinese to Persian to Caucasian carpets. Expensive
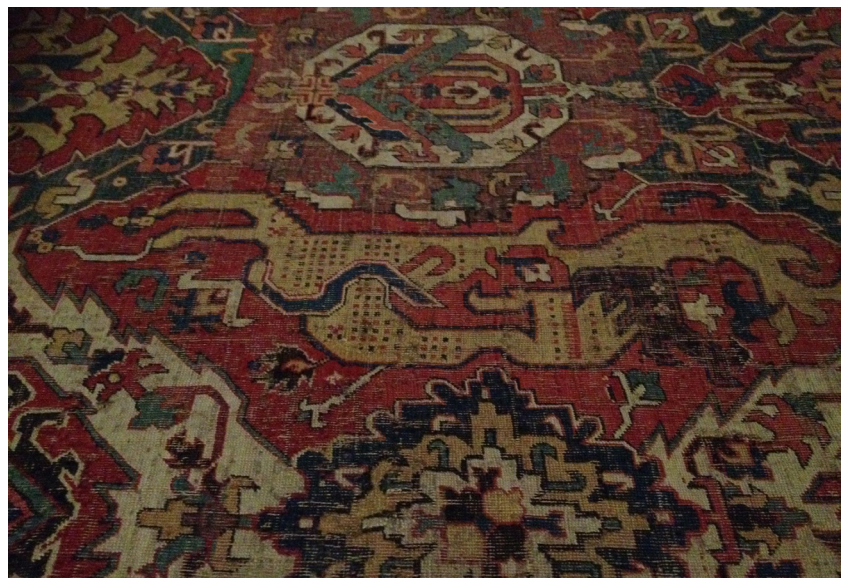
// Figure 1
Detail, dragon carpet, Safavid empire, Caucasus, 18th Century.

034

carpets, like those made for the Shah, have the highest thread counts. Lower thread counts economize on detail, requiring a kind of Caucasian MPEG (or DCEG, Dragon Carpet Experts Group!) algorithm for what can be left out.

————A kind of moiré pattern is also in evidence. Where Iranian carpets have curvilinear designs, Caucasian carpets are more angular. This is partly because Iranian carpets used asymmetrical knots, Caucasian carpets (like Anatolian carpets) used square knots. So you have one matrix superimposed on another, turning curving lines jagged and giving rise to angular artifacts.

————Caucasian carpets are large and complex rugs, not nomad or village products but produced in urban workshops. Two more material and creative forces intervene in the transformation of the dragon. The designers drew cartoons based on their knowledge and imagination. The weavers adapted the cartoons. Indeed most Caucasian carpets are woven from drawings, not knot plans that would specify the number of knots. This gives weavers more freedom and responsibility and allows the pattern to "drift" (Thompson 2003: 287). They are copies of copies of copies, with no slavish attitude toward the original. Kind of like pirate copies, or bootlegs.

BOOTLEG CONTEXTS ———— Outside of major TV stations and a few first-run movie theaters, a great deal of the media that consumers receive in many Arab countries are low quality: bootlegs bought in the market or on the street, peer-to-peer bootlegs, Youtube videos, video blogs, and poor TV and internet reception. The primary case of Arab low-resolution media is the pirate market.

————Traveling wrecks the image, as we've seen. Similar to my description above, Hito Steyerl (2012) characterizes the "poor image" as an image that gives lie to the fetishism of high-resolution images made for expensive, up-to-date platforms. Low-resolution, ugly, and moving fast, "uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and re-edited," the poor image is the lumpenproletariat of images. Steyerl aligns the poor image with radicalism of Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa's 1969 manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema," in that it enables more people to participate in image circulation – though it is no longer necessarily for radical ends.

————Many artists accept and deploy low-fi aesthetics, embracing the artifacts and glitches that emerge. In *Hanan al-Cinema* I described the works of many artists, including the Egyptian artists Maha Maamoun, Mohammed Allam, and the Lebanese filmmakers Rania Stephan, Riad Yassin, Roy Dib, Walid Ra'ad,

035

and others, who use scavenged VHS "archives" and bootlegged digital images of popular movies and TV shows that are otherwise inaccessible. Stefan's *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011, **fig.2**) is composed from 78 VHS tapes of Egyptian movies featuring the beloved actress. In the transfer from 35mm to VHS video to digital file there occur layers of compression, distortion, and loss – like the story of Hosni herself. Analog demagnetization and the artifacts of digital compression become metonymies for the struggle to regain effaced histories and distorted historical knowledge.

// Figure 2
Rania Stefan, *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011). Digital video, color, sound, 70 min

LABORIOUSLY HUMAN-BUILT DATABASES AND ARCHIVES

_____ Given the state's incapacity to produce and maintain archives, or its unwillingness to make archives available to the public, individuals and organizations are working to produce their own archives of all sorts of artifacts. These range from historical documents to bootleg copies of works otherwise unavailable to the public to tools for DIY making, such as manuals. The oft-stated Borgesian anxiety that the digital archive is becoming a map the size of the territory is simply not the case in Arab countries.

_____ Given the many problems with official archives of moving-image media, I focused in *Hanan al-Cinema* on unofficial archives that artists and amateurs build. The recent recovery of films made in the 1960s and 1970s by the Palestinian Film Unit constitutes a dramatic tale of scavenging for archives and constructing an artisanal network. Mohanad Yaqubi recently completed a film about the discovery of this precious film archive, *Off Frame, aka Revolution until Victory* (2016).

_____ In *Hanan al-Cinema* I describe Egyptian artist Mohamed Allam's project *My Nineties* (2013). Lacking access to television stations' archives, which are either proprietary or simply nonexistent, Allam collected about 4000 VHS cassettes from "different scrap stores, random individuals and sellers in the Friday market in Cairo." Among these he identified about 200 that contained recordings of TV shows from the 1990s, recordings that people

036

made at home with their VCRs. At the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo Allam installed period TVs and VCRs to exhibit his selections of news, drama, comedy, children's programs, music videos, and advertising – the audiovisual heritage of a generation of Egyptians. Some of the videos were then posted to the site of Medrar, the media art organization Allam co-founded.

Audiovisual archives are rare and delicate resources: a great struggle to assemble, marked by image deterioration. Some partial, low-quality archives that work pretty well are those assembled by festivals and exhibitors, such as Ashkal Alwan and the Beirut Art Center in Beirut, the Cinémathèque de Tanger, and the Cairo Video Festival organized by Medrar. The Arab Digital Expression Foundation founded in 2005 by Ranwa Yehia and Ali Shaath and based in Muqattam City, Cairo, advocates for freedom of expression and open-source software. ADEF trains people in manual and digital media, including in summer camps for young people in 7 countries. The organization advocates for freedom of expression and open-source software, and thus teaches Pandora, Open Street Map, Open Biblio and Wiki: they write Arabic contributions to Wikipedia. ADEF member Kinda Hassan told Laura Cagnisi, "Information needs to be accessible to all, so we developed an online management system: logistics, media, and database of participants. If anyone falls out, the information is all there" (Cugusi 2014: 4).

Informal archivists accept that many of the artifacts they collect will be fragmentary, low quality, pirated, and seemingly insignificant. The video archiving platform Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive) argues for a radical archiving from below, working with available media, disregarding intellectual property issues, so that users can have maximum access and contribution. Pad.ma was founded by Mumbai media art collective CAMP, Berlin collective 0x2620, and the Alternative Law Forum from Bangalore. Pad.ma's manifesto "10 Theses on the Archive" (2010) asserts the necessity of beginning to make an archive in the middle, from the data or artifacts at hand. One provocative thesis, "The Direction of Archiving Will Be Outward, Not Inward," argues that piracy constitutes effective archiving for media that are ignored by official archives.

Pad.ma draws on Cinémathèque Française founder Henri Langlois' assertion, to the horror of archivists who insist that preservation take priority over exhibition, that films are best archived by showing them. The founders emphasize that some of

037

the most potent videos are the fragments, the refuse, such as sur-
veillance-camera footage: they characterize these as "that which
has not yet been deployed." The archive acts here as bottom-feeder,
gaining strength on the refuse of capitalist media. An ethics of
care and responsibility informs the ecology of knowledge, which
the founders call "intellectual propriety," that replaces the private
goal of intellectual property.

_____ But since the July 2013 coup, the Egyptian government has
cracked down on NGOs, artists' organizations, and individuals that
cultivate public protest, creativity, or even dialogue. In 2015 Egyp-
tian officials raided the Townhouse Gallery, Cultural Resource/
Al Mawred Al Thakafy, Contemporary Image Collective, Cima-
theque, and oher Cairo arts organizations, confiscating hard
drive and documents and holding individuals for interrogation.
Mosireen, which had uploaded hundreds of videos during and
since the 2011 Tahrir revolution, had to transfer its archive out-
side Egypt for safety. ADEF has had to curtail its activity since
the coup, as it has become too dangerous to share user-generated
content. State terror thus is another important factor in the pre-
carity of media organizations and informal archives.

_____ I have to declare that as an advocate for media artists I resist
the radical call of Pad.ma and others to ignore intellectual prop-
erty. I think it's very important that Arab media artists get fair
distribution and be paid reasonable rental and purchase fees. This
insistence would seem to raise the dilemma between remuneration
and visibility – that a media artist can either keep work out of cir-
culation, in order to protect it as a commodity, or make it widely
available online, even if it's a low-quality image and the artist
doesn't get paid. But there are alternatives, as when video artists
simultaneously make their work available for free online, and rent
and sell it though distributors, and in some cases sell editioned
versions through galleries: Akram Zaatari and Maha Maamoun
are two examples. Maamoun told Rasha Salti, "When possible, I
believe that artists should push to increase the number of editions
of their work; in that sense, to reclaim its ownership. [...] For some
reason I feel that spreading the work cheaply and widely should
not prevent me from considering it and selling it as a 'limited edi-
tion,' though of course that might deter potential buyers. I believe
these, the high-quality DigiBETA, and the internet file, are all
different forms and qualities of the work, each form having an
edition suitable to its form and circuit. Whether this is, or can be
made legal – I don't know" (Salti 2012: 29).

038

EMBODIED RESPONSES ⸻ Working with low and available technologies transforms the perception and embodiment of the user. High-quality, "rich" media platforms, when used as directed, disguise to some degree the materiality of the platform. They permit that feeling of immersion that is often upheld as the goal of verisimilitude. High-quality platforms –such as uncompressed movies watched on a big screen with good sound, high-quality audio recordings played on up-to-date devices, and legally acquired, glitch-free games – do invite embodied responses, as I and others have long argued. However, these embodied responses are likely to align with the effect desired by the artist or manufacturer. Low-quality platforms, in calling attention to their materiality, also disturb the embodied or mimetic relationship to the media work. Instead they invite the viewer, listener, or player to mimetically embody their own quirks, jams, and glitches.

⸻ Although compressed, scratchy, glitchy, media works lose quality, they gain something in the fact of circulating. This something unfolds in the receiver's body and mind in glitchy, uncomfortable ways. Since the pre-internet days, the films gain scratches and videos demagnetize, the more they show where they came from. Layers of reformatting indicate a movie's trajectory, for example from 35mm theatrical film, to home video in NTSC, to PAL video, to digital file, to online platform, with subtitles and watermarks added along the way. Low-quality media circulated online also draw attention to the fact that they have been handled multiple times over – how many times is sometimes indicated, for example by YouTube views. The viewer becomes a receiver, catching the video as it hurtles along its itinerary, and passing it back into circulation. When a receiver takes some time to examine and cherish the video that has arrived, its history unfolds and connects her to the world it passed through. Even a poor-quality, distracted reception connects the viewer to the trajectory the image took, and includes viewers in a rough, fatigued collective. Steyerl does not romanticize this possibility, since poor images can just as easily play on people's tiredness and vulnerability. "Poor images present a snapshot of affective condition of the crowd," including paranoia, fear, craving for fun (2012: 41). I would also keep in mind that the circulation of poor images enriches the corporations that provide their platforms, such as Google/YouTube and Facebook/Instagram.

⸻ Recipients of the poor image tend to be those excluded from access to high-quality platforms. In the more conservative Arab contexts, women are more likely to receive low-quality images.

039

This is for the simple reason that women are more likely to watch movies in the safety and comfort of home, rather than going out to movie theaters, a mostly male public space: a phenomenon Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (2015) studies in the case of Algeria.

ENFOLDING-UNFOLDING AESTHETICS _____ I've been describing these works using my method of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics. This approach assumes that history is continuous, and that apparent breaks are really folds. This aesthetics can be compared to Ariella Azoulay's conception of photography as a civil contract among represented person, photographer, and receiver. These models permit a broader concept of indexicality as that which performs a connection between source and receiver through media work.

_____ Enfolding-unfolding aesthetics is grounded in concepts from Deleuze, Bergson, Leibniz, Isma'ili Shi'ite thought, and the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and sixteenth century Persian philosopher Sadr al-Din al-Shirâzî. All of these are philosophies of the universe as a One unfolding into Many, transforming and growing. In enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, mediation does not separate things from their material and physical origins, but connects them to their receiver. The infinite flow of the universe is folded, shaped, encoded by forces that are often explicitly algorithmic. Often what we perceive is already filtered, coded in this way: partly produced by the codes, as Caucasian carpets and compressed video show (see Marks 2010, 2014a, 2014b, and forthcoming a).

_____ As the image travels in time and space, it collects noise and interference: these become part of what we perceive. Yet a receiver can reach through the noise and encoding, to unfold the material and historical sources of media images. The image travels time and space until it reaches our perception. It is amazing that a little part of the universe finally reaches my body! By comparing what you perceive with the interface that shaped it, you can get a sense of where it has come from and what it has passed through. When the medium shows its materiality, we're lucky, because it's easier to detect the codes by which it's enfolded.

040

// References

Cascone, Kim (2005): The Aesthetics of Failure: "Post-Digital" Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music. In: Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music. New York: Continuum, pp. 392-398

Cugusi, Laura (2014): Free Expression: The Arab Digital Expression Foundation in Conversation with Laura Cugusi. In: Ibraaz. May 2014

Galloway, Alexander, and Eugene Thacker (2007): The Exploit: A Theory of Networks. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Hadj-Moussa, Ratiba (2015): La Télévision par Satellite au Maghreb: Espaces de Résistance, Espaces Critiques. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble

Kittler, Friedrich (1999): Gramophone, Film, Typewriter. trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Larkin, Brian (2008): Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Marks, Laura U. (2010): Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Marks, Laura U. (2014a): Noise in Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics. In: Herzog, Amy/Richardson, John/Vernallis, Carol (eds.): The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 101-114

Marks, Laura U. (2014b): Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics, or the Unthought at the Heart of Wood. In: Gaafar, Rania/Schulz, Martin (eds.): Technology and Desire: The Transgressive Art of Moving Images. Karlsruhe: ZKM and London: Intellect Books, pp. 151-161

Marks, Laura U. (2015): Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Marks, Laura U. (forthcoming a): Radical Gestures of Unfolding in Films by Mohamed Soueid and The Otolith Group. In: Grønstad, Asbjørn (ed.): Visual Culture and the Aesthetics of Gesture. New York: Routledge

Marks, Laura U. (forthcoming b): Poor Images, Ad-hoc Archives, Artists' Rights: The Scrappy Beauties of Handmade Digital Culture. International Journal of Communication, special issue ed. Marwan Kraidy, Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture

Nunes, Mark (2011): Introduction: Error, Noise, and Potential. In: Nunes, Mark (ed.): Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Culture. New York: Continuum, pp. 3-23

Pad.ma (2010): 10 Theses on the Archive. https://pad.ma/texts/padma:10_Theses_on_the_Archive, last accessed December 1, 2016

Salti, Rasha (2012): Archive Fever: A Conversation Between Naeem Mohamien, Maha Maamoun and Rania Stephan. In: Manifesta Journal. Vol. 14, issue 1, p. 29

Sterne, Jonathan (2012): MP3: The Meaning of a Format. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Steyerl, Hito (2012): In Defense of the Poor Image. In: The Wretched of the Screen. Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp. 31-45

Thompson, Jon (2003): Early Safavid Carpets and Textiles. In: Thompson, Jon/Canby, Sheila R. (eds.): Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1501-1576. Milan: Skira

// About the Author

Laura U. Marks is a scholar, theorist, and programmer of independent and experimental media arts. She works on experimental cinema, media arts of the Arab world, Islamic genealogies of Western philosophy, and the embodied, process-based analysis of information culture. Her newest book is *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (MIT Press, 2015); she is also the author of *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke UP, 2000), *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minnesota UP, 2002), and *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (MIT Press, 2010). She has curated programs of experimental media for festivals and art spaces worldwide, most recently the Robert Flaherty Seminar in 2015. She teaches in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

041

NOISE, AGENCY, AND THE SOUND OF OBSOLETE TECHNOLOGY

In 1931 the Western Electric Company ran an advertising campaign to promote its new Noiseless Recording process for Talking Pictures. The advertisement **(fig.1)** reminds us that sound technology generates as well as reproduces sound: that is, all sound technologies produce noise. In the case of optical sound film – the system being promoted in the advertisement – noise is created by a number of factors, including the grain of the film stock on which the optical soundtrack is recorded and printed, electrical resistance in recording, projection and amplification systems, and the scratches that mark a film print over time. In the sound technologies that predated optical film, such as the wax cylinder and shellac disc, noise is generated during playback by the physical contact that takes place between the cylinder, or disc, and the needle. All such noises might be thought of as the sound of technology: the sound of each medium's physical substrate, or its mechanical and electrical components.

_____ Historically these sounds have been treated as a problem, and successive waves of technological innovation have been directed at repressing the sound of technology. As the Western Electric advertisement proclaims, "Soon you will hear talking pictures made with all the humming and scratching noises barred out." As a result of technological innovation, including the introduction of new recording and playback formats, the sound of technology begins to distinguish not only one medium or format from another, but also one historical period from another. Thus the sound of technology has a historical dynamic that impacts upon the audibility and affectivity of the particular forms of noise associated with obsolete technologies and dated formats.

_____ Technological and institutional resistance to the sound of technology raises the question of what happens if the creative

decision is made to embrace these sounds rather than repress them. What happens when this sounding of a medium's material and technological bases is shifted to the foreground of perceptual experience, positioning the sound of technology as the focus of the listener's attention? My article aims to consider these questions by way of another, posed by Petra Lange-Berndt in a recently published collection on materiality in art: "What does it mean to give agency to the material, to follow the material and to act *with* the material" (2015: 13). Asking Lange-Berndt's question in relation to the sound of technology prompts consideration of what might be at stake when agency is given to sounds that are normally repressed, considered extraneous to the 'proper' content of films, records and tapes, and which are usually listened *through* rather than listened *to*.

_____ Within established political discourse the notion of agency has traditionally been associated with human activity and human capacities. However, for Lange-Berndt agentive potential might also be attributed to matter itself: "Clearly materials have agency, they can move as well as act and have a life of their own, challenging an anthropocentric post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition" (ibid: 16). One of the effects of the tradition to which Lange-Berndt refers has been to construct certain forms of matter as raw material – a (passive) resource to be given form and meaning through human agency, and valued only to the extent that it might serve human needs. By attributing agency to the material with which an artist works, Lange-Berndt challenges this anthropocentric view and its associated drive for human mastery and control over the material world.

_____ Lange-Berndt's use of the term agency would appear to owe a debt to recent new materialist scholarship, which, according to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "is posthumanist in the sense that it conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency" (2010: 7). However, work undertaken within this field might at the same time appear to problematize Lange-Berndt's particular use of the term. According to Karen Barad agency is not something that someone or something 'has': "Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of 'subjects' or 'objects'" (1998: 112). Consequently, agency is not something that can be given or passed from one human or non-human body to another. Rather, Barad redefines agency as a matter of *intra-action*: a neologism signifying "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007: 33). Barad's formulation of agency might therefore seem to discount the idea,

043

suggested by Lange-Berndt's question, of an artist *giving* agency to the material with which they work. However, in some ways Lange-Berndt's question can be seen to chime with Barad's notion of intra-action in the latter's focus on agency as a relationship: Lange-Berndt asks, "what does it mean to [...] follow the material and to act *with* the material."

———— At the core of Lange-Berndt's question is a fundamental concern with the relationship between the artist and their materials, and it is in reference to this relationship that I would like to draw upon Lange-Berndt's own use of the term agency. While out of tune with Barad's formulation, and while perhaps running the risk of humanizing the non-human, I would argue that Lange-Berndt's proposition that agency can be *given* to the material serves an important political function. That is, it serves as a tactical resource that enables us to rethink and potentially realign the relationship between the human and non-human, between the human and the material world. While Lange-Berndt's use of the term may not adequately reflect the nuanced formulations and debates that circulate within new materialist writing, it nevertheless has a tactical value that lies in its capacity to challenge those notions of mastery and control that underpin particular traditions and conceptualizations of art practice. At the same time, in suggesting that an artist might give agency to the material, or share agency with the material, Lange-Berndt proposes that we no longer understand matter to be passive. Here, perhaps, we encounter the notion that "the world kicks back" (Barad 1998: 112): that matter can be 'resistant', 'resilient' or 'recalcitrant' when a human agent interacts with it. Thus when framed within the terms of a relationship, Lange-Berndt's question can be seen to support an understanding of non-human agency that dispenses with the humanist, humanizing and anthropocentric notion of intentionality: "Clearly materials have agency, they can move as well as act and have a life of their own" (2015: 16).

———— In what follows my aim is to reflect on this notion of agency within art practice through a consideration of sonic art and music that engages with the noisy sounds of obsolete technologies and dated formats. Central to this is a comparative analysis of work by John Oswald and Walter Ruttmann: specifically, Oswald's *wknd 58* (1998), and the original radio documentary that provides its source material, Ruttmann's *Weekend* (1930). In some respects the emphasis I place on the work of two male artists runs the risk of reinforcing what Marie Thompson has described as "a patrilineal 'dotted line' that characterises histories of musical

044

noise and sonic experimentalism" (2016: 85). As Tara Rodgers has observed, "existing electronic music histories [...] have thus far conjured a canon of male composers and writers" (2010: 5), while Thompson comments in relation to experimental music that "its dominant historical narrative and canon remain conservative insofar as they privilege the activity of individual male 'pioneers'" (2016: 98). Although my decision to focus on the work of individual male 'pioneers' does nothing to threaten the integrity of the patrilineal dotted line identified by Thompson, it does afford an opportunity to consider those notions of mastery and control that are strongly associated both with hegemonic forms of masculinity and with commonly held ideas about the nature of authorship in art practice. The construction of masculinity I refer to here is signalled by Rodgers in the proposition that "aesthetic priorities of rationalistic precision and control epitomize notions of male technical competence and 'hard' mastery in electronic music production" (2010: 7). The relationship between control, technology and masculinity is also touched upon by other feminist writers on electronic music, including Hannah Bosma, who proposes that control is of central importance to hegemonic masculinity (2016: 107). These views of masculinity also echo observations made by Judy Wajcman, who writing on feminist theories of technology, comments, "in contemporary Western society, the hegemonic form of masculinity is still strongly associated with technical prowess and power" (2010: 145).

_____ An alternative to the relationship with and uses of technology associated with hegemonic masculinity is observed by Rodgers in the work of musician Clara Rockmore. Commenting on critical reaction to Rockmore's theremin performances in the 1930s, Rodgers proposes that, "Rockmore opened an 'elsewhere' within electronic music discourses [...] a space for mutual encounters between humans and technologies, between familiarity and otherness, that motivates wonder and a sense of possibility instead of rhetorics of combat and domination" (2010: 9). My own contention is that, like Rockmore's theremin performances, Oswald's *wknd 58* can be heard to present an opening onto an 'elsewhere' within art practice and discourse: one that offers other ways of thinking about the relationship between the artist and the sonic materials with which they work.

_____ Created for the project *Walter Ruttmann Weekend Remix*, produced in 1998 by the Bavarian broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk, John Oswald's *wknd 58* reworks what was to be filmmaker

045

NOISE, AGENCY, AND THE SOUND OF OBSOLETE TECHNOLOGY

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

Walter Ruttmann's only venture into radio production. Ruttmann's *Weekend* (1930) is frequently referenced in histories of sonic art, primarily because Ruttmann's 'cinematic' approach to the organization of recorded sound seems to have prefigured what later became known within the field of art music as *musique concrète* (Concordia Archival Project 2008; Kim-Cohen 2009: 10). The program was described by Ruttmann as a "photographic radio play" (Eisner 1930), signalling the fact that it was produced using Tri-Ergon optical film sound technology. The Tri-Ergon system allowed Ruttmann to transfer the techniques he had developed while editing films to radio, and in particular the use of montage editing. This is most audible in the two lively *Jazz der Arbeit* sequences that open and close the program, in which various sounds of the workplace are edited together in what Ruttmann described as "strong rhythmic counterpoint" (Film-Kurier 1930).

———— What we observe in the cinematic manifestation of montage is the visible inscription of difference, whereby editing reveals rather than conceals the cut joining, and separating, two shots. Transplanting the technique to radio, Ruttmann creates audible sonic montage: sound that grabs the listener by the ear, sound organized by the inscription of difference. Unlike classical continuity editing, in which the organization of the film's material works towards transparency, montage presents itself as an *overt* demonstration of artistic mastery over material. Montage is thus an explicitly interventionist form, fundamentally concerned with controlling, shaping and forming its source material. In this sense montage finds its place within what Jean-François Lyotard characterized as the tradition of modernity, in which: "The relationship between human beings and materials is fixed by the Cartesian program of mastering and possessing nature. A free will imposes its own aims on given elements by diverting them from their natural course. These aims are determined by means of the language which enables the will to articulate what is possible (a project) and to impose it on what is real (matter)" (1985: 47).

———— The pursuit of mastery described by Lyotard is not only audible in *Weekend*, but is also clearly articulated in Ruttmann's own writing. A few months prior to starting work on the program Ruttmann published a manifesto for a new art of recorded sound, in which he proposed: "Everything audible in the world becomes material. This endless material can now be brought together and given new meaning in accordance with the laws of time and space [...] Thus, the way is open for an entirely new sound art – new in terms of both means and effect" (1929).

046

_____ The desire for mastery over the material is clearly expressed in Ruttmann's manifesto in his references to meaning and law. Ruttmann's stated goal here is to reshape and reorganize sonic material in order to impose (new) meaning on it, and in addition to bring this material under the jurisdiction of "the laws of time and space" – which is to say, the linguistic and numerical systems that attempt to render material and phenomena knowable in human terms.

_____ However, in a project fundamentally concerned with the precise control of sound, there was one sonic element over which Ruttmann would have had little or no control: namely, the sound of technology. It is precisely this sound that becomes the focus of John Oswald's reworking of Ruttmann's *Weekend,* as Barbara Schäfer's liner notes for the CD release of *wknd 58* indicate: "The basis for the remix by the Canadian John Oswald was the loud noise on the copy of the 1930 original. Oswald's remix conducted a digital material battle with the original, one which duplicated in Ruttmann's discontinuous rhythm the copying noises which had developed over time" (2000: n.p.).

_____ Described as a "digital material battle," the liner notes construct Oswald's relationship with this noise in combative terms. However, this interpretation of the piece, I would argue, fundamentally misunderstands the nature of Oswald's work here, and thereby misses or obscures what I would contend is potentially the most radical aspect of *wknd 58.*

_____ In some ways Oswald's approach to creating music shares important similarities with the work undertaken by Ruttmann in *Weekend.* Throughout his career Oswald has consistently drawn on montage as a key aesthetic strategy in his radical reworking of existing pieces of recorded music, and like Ruttmann, his use of the device is guided by a concern with precision and control. Thus while Ruttmann commented when editing *Weekend*, "With sound montage one-fifth of a second counts" (Eisner, 1930), Oswald has described how some of his pre-digital work was constructed using edited fragments of recording tape that contained a mere 10 milliseconds of sound time (2001: 8). Furthermore, although Oswald has acknowledged the influence of William Burroughs' cut-up technique on his work (in the process inserting himself into the patrilineal dotted line discussed earlier), it is clear that intentionality rather than chance is what drives his own use of montage: "Burroughs's search for the random aspect of juxtaposition and cut-ups was completely contrary to my attempt to control

047

the cut-up effect and make very careful choices as to which words go together" (Oswald, 2002: 48).

_____ However, Oswald's use of montage demonstrates a certain sensitivity to his source materials that is not readily apparent in Ruttmann's *Weekend*. Plunderphonics, the term used by Oswald to characterize both the technique and approach adopted in his reworking of recorded music, has been interpreted and celebrated by some critics as an assault on his source recordings. However, according to Oswald, the motivation behind Plunderphonics is not a destructive desire to mutilate the original: "I love the music. In my mind, it's certainly not an act of vandalism" (ibid: 43). If this comment provides a general sense of the relationship between artist and source material, then another, made by Oswald specifically in relation to his composition *Dab* (1989) – in which he samples and radically re-edits Michael Jackson's *Bad* (1987) – offers an important insight into his creative approach to reworking existing music: "It all seems to be an intensification of qualities i [sic] found in *Bad*" (Oswald, 2001: 28).

_____ This relationship with the source material, in which Oswald responds creatively to the qualities he perceives within it, is clearly evident in the way in which noise is treated in *wknd 58*. The piece is structured, in part, by the repetition of particular sounds sampled from the original program. Thus we hear musical sounds and 'concrete' sounds that have been removed from their original context and repeated within a dense, noise-laden mix. This mix serves to emphasize the noise in the source recording, so that rather than listening through the sound of technology we are invited to actively listen to it. In this way the piece can be understood, like *Dab,* to be an intensification of the qualities found in the original material: in this case, an intensification of the noise on the recording, and thus an intensification of the sound of technology. Oswald's foregrounding of this noise is uncompromising, and the most radical part of the composition features *only* the rumbling, hissing, crackling sound of analog noise. The more obviously 'representational' sounds of Ruttmann's original program are often relegated to the background, and rather than emphasizing the rhythmic pattern that might have been inherent in the source recording (e.g. metal being hammered) or subjecting that sound to rhythmic repetition through the application of montage techniques, Oswald's use of repetition makes these sounds difficult to hear as rhythmic musical material. Rather, they become part of a texture, part of the noise.

048

_____ It is only the repetition of these 'representational' sounds, recognizable from the original program, that gives any indication that the material has been manipulated, reworked and remixed. Had Oswald been more radical in his removal of these sounds, working only with the noise from the original recording, there would have been even less evidence of manipulation or control. That is, an edited collection of the 'unmodulated' parts of the source recording would probably sound little or no different from the original noise itself, in which case, there would be no evidence of authorial intervention or mastery over the material – as is the case in that section of the composition which features only the sounds of noise.

_____ One thing this might suggest is that this particular material is difficult to work with: it self-organizing, resistant, and resilient, reducing or even removing the artist's capacity to exert control over it. If, leaning on Barad, we hear this as the sound of the world kicking back, then here is one way in which noise might be understood to have agency. Importantly this agency emerges in the relationship that is created between Oswald and the material with which he works, in which the sound of technology is given space and time to be heard on its own terms: "There is constant noise on the recording, and that's what I had to *work with*. Instead of trying to eliminate it as completely as possible by technical means, I decided to do the opposite" (Oswald, 2000: n.p., my emphasis).

_____ What we hear in *wknd 58* is an artist giving themselves over to the material, in the sense that the whole remix aspires to the condition of noise. The piece becomes noise, not in an abstract theoretical sense, but in the more literal sense that it is brought within the gravitational field of the crackle, hiss and hum of the original recording. This approach contrasts markedly with Ruttmann's *Weekend*, in which agency is undeniably attributed to the artist. This is most clearly demonstrated in Ruttmann's use of rhythmic editing, in which form is imposed upon sonic material with little or no regard for its inherent qualities. Indeed, it would be possible to achieve something of the effect Ruttmann describes as "rhythmic counterpoint" by rearranging the order of the sound samples, or even replacing some of them with completely different sounds. What we hear in Ruttmann's original program is a project, to use Lyotard's term, that seeks to reorganize the world through sound. It proceeds from an idea, articulated through language, which is then imposed upon sonic material. As Ruttmann states in his manifesto, "everything audible in the world becomes material,"

049

which is to say *raw* material to be given form by the artist. There is no recognition here of the materiality of the (sonic) world as it is, in an artistic approach that is fundamentally concerned with transformation: turning hammer blows into music. In contrast, Oswald's remix gives the sense that agency is shared with the material, that the material's qualities and properties play through the project and help to form it.

_____ Although Oswald's piece may not represent a radically different methodological approach to Ruttmann's – it is after all produced by cutting up and reorganizing recorded sound – it does, however, propose a fundamentally different relationship with sound to that proposed by Ruttmann's piece. In *wknd 58* we hear an artist listening to their materials, acknowledging their materiality, and creating the conditions under which those materials might be heard on their own terms. To return to Lange-Berndt's question, here we have an example of creative practice that gives agency to the material, follows the material, and acts with it.

_____ Oswald's project is separated from Ruttmann's by a period of almost 70 years, during which time the audibility of analog noise has undergone significant transformation. That is, as a result of technological change, manifested in the changing sounds of the sound of technology, forms of noise that we once familiar and inaudible are no longer so, and are thus heard and appreciated in new ways. Sounds that were once listened through may now be listened to: think, for example, of how the analog noise of vinyl has been fetishized in an age of digital technology. Thus the passage of time can be heard to reenergize the sounds of obsolete technologies and dated formats, and in increasing their audibility has the potential to given them greater agency. For an artist like Oswald, working with archive material – or for artists choosing to work with obsolete technologies and dated formats – temporal displacement of this kind materializes the sound of technology, materializing or rematerializing the sounds with which they work, and bringing noise from the background to the foreground of perceptual experience. In this way the sound of technology inscribes itself as an audible presence in video shot on obsolete or dated formats, as in the work of Peggy Ahwesh and Sadie Benning, or contemporary music recorded and mixed on cassette tape, like that produced by the Austrian artist Ana Threat. Working with this material presence, artists necessarily share agency with what is both a material sound, and a sounding of their chosen medium's technological and material foundations.

050

NOISE, AGENCY, AND THE SOUND OF OBSOLETE TECHNOLOGY

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

_____ Asking the question "what does it mean to give agency to the material" returns us to the issue of what the political potential of the sound of obsolete technologies and dated formats might be. Within the arts the politics of noise has often been constructed in combative terms, as a form of attack or assault: thus Jacques Attali proposes "Noise is a weapon"(1985: 24). This indeed may provide a productive approach to thinking about some of the sorts of practice referenced above, in terms of the ways in which the contemporary use of obsolete technology might offer forms of audible resistance to the discourses of technological change promoted by corporations with a vested interest in technological change. There is also perhaps a Brechtian, anti-illusionist framework that can be applied to the sounds of technology, within which particular forms of noise might be understood to have political meaning and value. This is illustrated by the work of sound artist Helen Thorington, who commenting on her own use of the sound of technology in the article *The Noise of the Needle* comments: "I record the noise of machinery, the clicks of tape recorders, the spinning of the reel [...] I call attention to the sound of work by using it to create my work. It carries part of my meaning. And part of my meaning is just that simple: to call attention to work, and thereby to the fiction I create and how I create it" (1993: 179).

_____ However, the notion of material agentiality presents another way in which the noisy sounds of obsolete technologies and dated formats might be understood as having political potential. If, as Lyotard argues, "the relationship between human beings and materials is fixed by the Cartesian program of mastering and possessing" (1985: 47) then this program is radically challenged by the simple act of sharing agency with the material. By relinquishing some degree of control and embracing the material presence of noise, creative practice is no longer about inscribing a project onto matter, and of mastering and possessing, but rather of acknowledging and listening. It is in this sense, then, that Oswald's *wknd 58* offers a radical alternative to the forms of mastery and control that have been seen as central to hegemonic masculinity, and thus to the models of the artist and artistic activity that derive from it. Of course, it could be argued that Oswald's use of noise simply bolsters his status as an artist, marking him out as a radical, iconoclastic figure in the terms understood, celebrated and privileged by those histories of electronic music and sound art which construct the patrilineal dotted line described by Thompson. However, while this may be the case, I would argue that those parts of the

051

composition which draw *exclusively* on the sound of technology point to an 'elsewhere' in electronic music discourse and practice: an elsewhere in which the identity and presence of the artist – if only for a moment – are no longer audible; an elsewhere in which the relationship between material and artist (rather than artist and material) might be described as 'radical indifference.' The political dimension of this form of practice lies precisely in shifting focus from the artist to the material. To do so is not merely to make a political *gesture*, suggesting some other field of activity in which 'real' political action might be undertaken, but rather it constitutes a political act in its own right – one that radically realigns the relationship between human beings and the material world, and offers an alternative way of being in the world.

// Image Credits
Fig. 1: Advertisement for Western Electric's Noiseless Recording process, published in
***Popular Science Monthly* (March 1931). Courtesy of AT&T Archives and History Center.**

// References
Attali, Jacques (1985): Noise: The Political Economy of Music. Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 16. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
Barad, Karen (1998): Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality. In: differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. Vol. 10, issue 2, pp. 87-128
Barad, Karen (2007): Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
Bosma, Hannah (2016): Gender and Technological Failures in Glitch Music. In: Contemporary Music Review. Vol. 35, issue 1, pp. 102-114
Coole, Diana and Frost, Samantha (eds.): (2010) New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
Concordia Archival Project (2008): The Concordia Collection Within Electroacoustic History. http://cec.sonus.ca/education/archive/elearning/module1/index_3_2_en.html#, last accessed October 1, 2016
Film-Kurier (1930): Ruttmanns photographisches Hörspiel. In: Goergen, Jeanpaul (ed.): Walter Ruttmann: eine Dokumentation. Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989, p. 130 [Originally published in: Film-Kurier, Berlin. Vol. 12, issue 41, February 15, 1930]
Lange-Berndt, Petra (2015): Introduction//How to Be Complicit with Materials. In: Lange-Berndt, Petra (ed.): Materiality. Documents in Contemporary Art. London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, MA: Art, pp. 12-23
Eisner, Lotte H. (1930): Walter Ruttmann schneidet ein Film-Hörspiel. In: Goergen, Jeanpaul (ed.): Walter Ruttmann: eine Dokumentation. Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989, p. 131 [Originally published in Film-Kurier, Berlin. Vol. 12, issue 53, March 1, 1930]
Kim-Cohen, Seth (2009): In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art. New York and London: Continuum
Lyotard, Jean-François (1985): Les Immatériaux. In: Art and Text. Vol. 17, pp. 47-57
Oswald, John (2000): Untitled. In: Walter Ruttmann Weekend Remix [CD liner notes]. Erding: Intermedium Records
Oswald, John (2001): Untitled. In: Plunderphonics 69/96 [CD liner notes]. San Francisco: Seeland Records
Oswald, John (2002): Undoing Time. John Oswald interviewed by David Keenan. In: The Wire. Issue 219 May, pp. 42-49
Rodgers, Tara (2010): Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
Ruttmann, Walter (1929): Neue Gestaltung von Tonfilm und Funk. Programm einer photographischen Hörkunst. In: Goergen, Jeanpaul (ed.): Walter Ruttmanns Tonmontagen als Ars Acustica. Siegen: Universität Gesamthochschule Siegen, 1994, pp. 25-26 [Originally

052

published in: Film-Kurier, Berlin. Vol. 11, issue 255, October 26, 1929]

Schäfer, Barbara (2000) Untitled. In: Walter Ruttmann Weekend Remix [CD liner notes]. Erding: Intermedium Records

Thompson, Marie (2016): Feminised Noise and the 'Dotted Line' of Sonic Experimentalism. In: Contemporary Music Review. Vol. 35, issue 1, pp. 85-101

Thorington, Helen (1993): The Noise of the Needle. In: Radiotext(e): Semiotext(e) # 16. Vol. 6, issue 1, pp. 178-180

Wajcman, Judy (2010): Feminist Theories of Technology. In: Cambridge Journal of Economics. Vol. 34, issue 1, pp. 143-152

Various Artists (2000) *Walter Ruttmann Weekend Remix*. Intermedium Records. intermedium rec 003

// About the Author

Andy Birtwistle, Reader in Film and Sound, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. Research interests include film sound, avant-garde film and art cinema, sonic arts and culture, modernism, media archaeology. Selected Publications: Cinesonica: Sounding film and video. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010; Photographic Sound Art and the Silent Modernity of Walter Ruttman's Weekend (1930). In: The New Soundtrack. Vol. 6, issue 2, 2016, pp. 109-127; Heavy Weather: Michelangelo Antonioni, Tsai Ming-liang, and The Poetics of Environmental Sound. In: Quarterly Review of Film and Video. Vol. 32, issue 1, 2015, pp. 72-90.

// License

053

// Gabriele Jutz

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT" MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

Released in 1987 by Fisher-Price, the pixelvision camera PXL2000 was, according to its manual, "the lightest, least expensive and easiest to use camcorder currently on the market."[1] Only slightly larger than a video cassette, a lightweight, cheap plastic case and big buttons make this analog camera easily identifiable as a toy intended for children or adolescents.[2] One of its particularities lies in its technological simplicity. The average user can do little to manipulate the recording, because there is no focus adjustment, no light adjustment, no variable speed and the image is constrained to black and white. At the same time, this apparent lack of options allowed for easily accessible video-making in the late 1980s. There is another feature that distinguishes pixelvision from any other recording device: by capturing video on an audio tape, pixelvision not only makes use of a standard audio support in an unexpected way, but also testifies to its genuine technological hybridism. When the camera is connected to a TV-monitor, these re-recordable audio cassettes can be played back and viewed immediately. The limited information capacity of an audio cassette not only results in a lack of color, but also in a reduced image size and a low-resolution image. As the manual explains, "[t]he pixels are larger than in conventional TV images and therefore more visible. On larger TV-screens, the lower resolution of the PXL2000 camcorder picture will be more noticeable" (ibid). As compared to the resolution of a modern 35mm color film, which is, expressed in digital terms, 12,750,000 pixels in width (Fossati 2009: 76), a PXL2000 image is composed of only 2,000 pixels – hence the camera's name. It records approximately ten minutes of video and audio, five minutes per side on a ninety-minute audio cassette. To make up for the reduced image size, a thick black box frame surrounds the image. Due to its low-resolution and its very slow screen refresh rate, a PXL2000 recording looks, well, pixelated and blurry; its gritty, hazy images with their washed-out look contribute considerably to the format's visual identity. As Henry Jenkins points out, "the Pixelvision's murky, grainy and unstable image has become the marker of alternative media authenticity" (2006: 154). In other words: its very materiality determines its meaning.

_____ The PXL2000 came with a built-in front microphone allowing for recording the soundtrack directly on tape. Due to its lack of directionality, the microphone indiscriminately picks up information and noise, including sounds emitted by the tape itself, which runs at a very high speed. Hence, a whirring noise is ever-present in a pixelvision audio recording and functions as a material reminder of its technological base. This "sound of technology," as Andy Birtwistle (2010: 85) would put it, can be regarded as the aural correlative of the format's visual noisiness, embedded in its pixelated texture. Another unique feature of the PXL2000 is its fixed-focus lens, nothing more than a "plastic disk shielding a 'photo receptor' attached to a small circuit board" (Almereyda 1993: 2). This lens allows one to come extremely close to the pro-filmic object, miraculously registering both detail and depth. According to Nina McCarty, "[t]he lack of distortion in objects close to the lens is striking, and it is the close-up that, to many, defines pixelvision" (McCarty 2005: 139). Or, as artist Erik Saks explains, "you can get up close to your subject whether it is an inanimate object or a person because that, in particular, is the sweet zone of what looks good in pixelvision – being close to things" (ibid). Together with the format's low-resolution, pixelated surface, the capability of shooting objects in extreme close-up enables the viewer to explore the surface of objects and of *tangibly* sensing both the texture of the medium and the texture of the pro-filmic event.

_____ The history of pixelvision as an artistic medium begins with a Dada-like joke. This simple point-and-shoot camera failed to attract children – why would a child be happy to shoot a few minutes of low-resolution grey video? – and was already withdrawn from the market in 1989. Not good enough for kids raised with the production values of MTV, it was soon embraced by the underground art scene. From a commercial point of view, pixelvision can rightly be called a failed technology, already fallen into obsolescence by the time artists began to work with it. It made its first appearance on the big screen in Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), in a scene shot in Pixelvision that is worked into the diegetic world of the film, and in which characters are shown shooting with the PXL. In the final shot of the pixelvision scene, a character passes by, looks into the lens and exclaims, "Man, there ain't no film in that shit!" This memorable line perfectly summarizes the low-cultural *haut goût* of the PXL2000 (as compared to 'real' film-making tools), before it turned into a retro object and collectors' item. Stripped down to its bare essentials, not only the camera itself

055

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

looks 'poor,' but the images it delivers manifest 'poorness' too. Originally conceived as a toy, abandoned by its makers, reborn as an avant-garde filmmaking tool and eventually synonymous with preciousness and scarcity, the PXL2000's shifting identities and transformations challenge us to engage with the format and its specific qualities in material, temporal, and political terms.

LOW RESOLUTION MEDIA _____ Questions of filmic materiality seem to have little relevance for film theory, which is mainly interested in content issues. Substandard image resolution is a strong marker of film's material base as it confronts us with the physicality of the projected image, its grains and pixels, hardly perceptible in high resolution formats; at the same time, a surface attesting to low resolution conveys culturally produced meaning, according to which these images are ranked, classified and 'sensed.' In her manifesto "In Defense of the Poor Image," Hito Steyerl states that "[t]he contemporary hierarchy of images is not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution" (2009: 3). Though low-resolution formats have existed before, digital technology and its possibility to upload, download, share, reformat and edit has dramatically increased the circulation of what Steyerl calls the "poor image." On the one hand, as Steyerl admits, the poor image is "perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings"; on the other it subverts "the fetish value of high resolution" (ibid: 7) and feeds into alternative audiovisual economies, by enabling the participation of a large group of producers and audiences.

_____ While Steyerl explores the relation between the technically poor image and digital capitalism, Laura Marks's *Hanan al-Cinema* (2015) situates the discussion of low resolution in the context of Third World experimental cinema from Arab-speaking countries. Unlike wealthy countries, which can trust in more or less reliable internet access, poorly infrastructured countries have to accept the loss of resolution and its companions compression and glitch [3] as everyday annoyances. According to Marks, "[g]litches remind us of the ideology of convention, which includes assumptions that users have up-to-date platforms, legally acquired software, and access to customer support, and also that their computers are able to stream data at optimal speeds on reliable electrical systems" (ibid: 251). Far from romanticizing "Arab glitch," Marks argues that low-resolution images are a considerable source of inspiration for artists in poorly

056

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

infrastructured countries. She pursues the question of how the daily experience of diminished image quality is exploited for artistic means: "Many artists in Arab countries explore the aesthetics of low-resolution video that has been copied multiple times, as a metaphor for selective memory and forgetting, an examination of archives, and a direct indication of practices of bootlegging, pirating, and making do with inferior copies" (ibid: 253).

_____ Both Steyerl and Marks discuss the issue of substandard image resolution within the context of contemporary digitization and image transfer. Steyerl's alignment of the "poor image" with class distinctions and defense against the imperative of pristine visuality in Western media landscapes, as well as Marks's emphasis on lesser privileged countries and the creative potential inherent in low resolution media, raise the question of what led earlier generations of audio-visual artists to *deliberately* explore the low end of technology. One of the best known examples is, of course, Super-8 filmmaking, which fully exploded as an artistic practice during the 1980s – the reason why J. Hoberman (1991) retrospectively called this decade "The Super-8s." This narrow, inexpensive gauge was appreciated by experimental filmmakers for its quasi-tangible graininess, which soon became a trademark of low-budget independent filmmaking. But from the 1990s onwards, the format and its provocative texture "gradually migrated from experimental to mainstream cinema and advertising, where the haptic image is now standard fare" (Marks 2015: 276). The final irony is that at about the same time Eastman Kodak stopped manufacturing Super-8 in 1998, contemporary digital devices made recreations of vintage effects available, suggesting the feeling of low-tech recording (Jutz 2016: 411). As pixelvision never became attractive enough for commercial purposes, what it shared then with Super-8 in the 1990s was, instead of a common future, a common past as a home-movie filmmaking tool.

_____ In terms of resolution, pixelvision might be situated in the same family as Vuk Ćosić's experiments in the late 1990s with ASCII, the American Standard Code of Information Interchange, in which the artist created his own software to convert still and moving images into this superannuated code, a relic from the early days of computer technology; and Gebhard Sengmüller's *VinylVideo* (1998), a fake piece of media archaeology, which makes the storage of video on analog long-playing records possible. Discovered or invented by artists during the 1990s, Pixelvision, ASCII and VinylVideo can be seen as being in competition for the lowest

057

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

resolution rate, an attempt to fill the vacuum of slowly vanishing graininess left behind by Super-8. Compared to standard video's 480 active lines of resolution, pixelvision has 100 and VinylVideo 84, all of them beaten by ASCII with its mere 20 lines. However, the revival of extremely reduced picture, and, at times, sound quality, which occurred at the very moment that technological perfection entered artistic practice, prompts us not only to criticize the teleological view of technology progressing ever forward, but also to reevaluate the role of the so-called obsolete within the media constellation of the 1990s.[4]

_____ Artworks which involve dated formats *and* low-tech aesthetics are not only a rewarding field for exploring their respective politics of representation, but also for examining the question of how materiality and temporality are connected. Ćosić's dated computer code, Sengmüller's attempt to make up for forgotten inventions, and some artists' repurposing of a commercially failed apparatus – pixelvision – have at least one thing in common: a trust in obsolete and low-tech media to regain the haptic quality of former media technologies. But are 'old' media and dated formats necessarily related to low-tech and hapticity? And how do they indicate 'pastness'? To reassess the significative potential of low resolution in temporal terms, it might be useful to take a look at Andy Birtwistle's investigations into film sound, where he explains how a medium's sonic signature itself – and not its content – is able to convey a feeling of pastness. As Birtwistle points out, in the realm of film sound, low-tech stands as the signifier of a technology of the past, because it foregrounds the technological and material circumstances of the sonic event as opposed to the "well-behaved, well-modulated and largely 'inaudible' soundtrack of mainstream cinema" (2010: 64). Simply put, the inaudibility of the contemporary sound of technology indicates presentness, whereas audible materiality today signals pastness (cf. ibid: 92). However, in the realm of cinematic images it would be misleading to support the idea that visible materiality embodied in a striking texture inevitably announces 'pastness.'[5] 35mm-film of course, as well as 16mm-film, could always deliver excellent image quality, whereas the later Super-8 could be regarded as rather 'poor'; and celluloid aside, there is the diminished quality of digital files, if shared and copied multiple times. Hence, one has to be aware that sound and image might indicate 'pastness' in a different way. Birtwistle concedes that "[...] it is surely a mistake to suppose that inaudibility is a unique feature of twenty-first-century technology,

058

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

and that with the recent development in digital media we are somehow finally approaching a point of complete technological inaudibility. Rather, inaudibility should be thought as an effect of currency, and it is therefore temporal *displacement* rather than a specific historical moment that determines the sound of *pastness*" (ibid: 92, emphasis in original). Pixelvision, a format falling into oblivion before it was re-activated by artists, will serve as the exemplary case study here for my explorations into the materiality, temporality and politics of a dated medium. I chose to look at three filmmakers – Sadie Benning, Michael Almereyda and Peggy Ahwesh – who are among the artists most often associated with the format.

EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO ART _____ Sadie Benning's videos gained attention in the early 1990s for their powerful involvement with heterosexual norms and the raw portrayal of queer identity. These highly intimate and personal video diaries were shown at gay and lesbian film festivals and were also included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial program. Benning began making video around the age of fifteen when her father, experimental filmmaker James Benning, gave her a PXL2000 for Christmas. Her first videos coincide with the advent of "riot grrrl," a socio-musical movement, which, though engaging with the Punk ethos, defied Punk's growing misogyny (Johnson 2009: 178–179). Benning's recurring theme is the questioning of empowerment within a culture not only hostile to non-standard gender identities, but also to young people and women. Her videos show a clear engagement in favor of difference – sexual or otherwise – and express rebellious non-conformism, but also its consequences, marked by feelings such as fear, anxiety and loneliness, which result from not fitting into social norms.

_____ Narrated in the present, and largely in the first person, all of Benning's nine pixelvision videos contain autobiographical references. Most are shot in her bedroom, a very personal space, and contain extreme close-ups of her body (Holmlund 2002: 301). *Me and Rubyfruit* (1990), Benning's first video to be overtly presented as a coming-out narrative, begins with a handwritten dedication: "For/Libby/And/The Rubyfruit in all of us." Surprisingly, the word "Libby" is blinking, "And" appears against a red background, and the rest of the dedication is written in green letters. As the missing black box frame in these initial inserts makes clear, color and blinking account for the use of a more advanced media format, because, as mentioned, pixelvision lacks color and does not

059

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

allow for special effects such as blinking. The film's title alludes to Rita Mae Brown's classic 1973 novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* about coming out in the United States' South. Benning's video consists in large parts of an imaginary dialogue between the author and a fictional girlfriend, exchanged via scrawled inter-titles on the one hand and voice-over (spoken by Benning herself) on the other. *Me and Rubyfruit* begins with a handwritten question: "Leota, you thought about getting married?," to which the voice-over quickly answers that "girls can't get married." The girls' musing about lesbian marriage oscillates between a dedication to breaking rules and awareness that lesbian romance must be hidden from the public sphere; it even comprises a dash of desperate Hollywood glamor when Benning's voice-over declares: "We'll kiss like they do in the movies, and then we'll be engaged." It is not by chance that the name of the imaginary girlfriend is "Leota." In Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle,* Leota is a young woman, with whom Molly, the main character, has her first sexual relationship in the sixth grade.
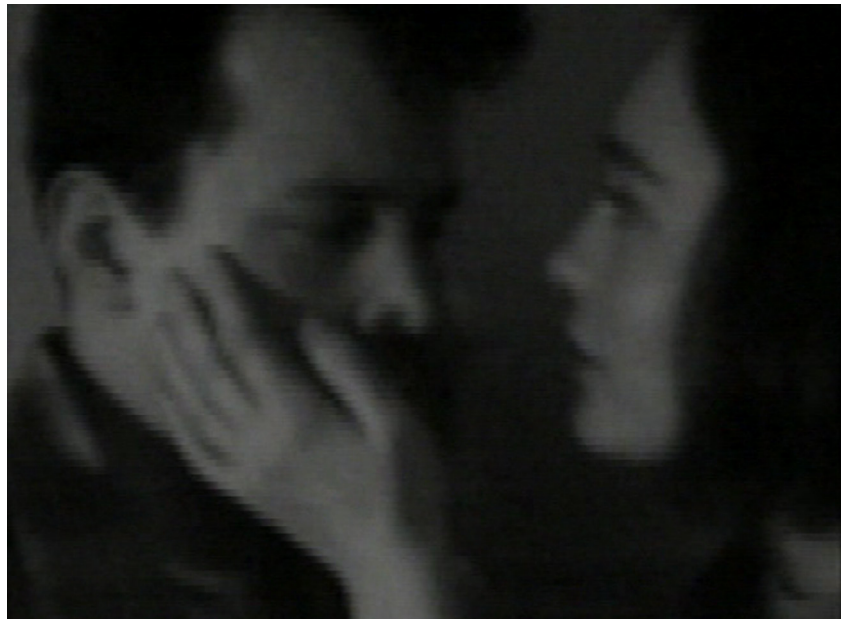
_____ The written comments are accompanied by intrusive close-ups of Benning's eye, ear, nose and hair and occasionally by shots captured from a televison screen or shots of stereotypically glamorous women found in magazines. Occasionally, Benning's voice-over gives way to snippets of pop songs and are quite suddenly interrupted. *Me and Rubyfruit* comes very close to the ideal of a "purist" usage of the PXL2000, which Nina McCarty describes as follows: "A Pixelvision purist would be a user who shoots and edits in the camera, with the original camera audio, and makes a video no longer than the length of one cassette. The purists confine themselves to the same technical limitations as the average home user in the late 1980s […]" (2005: 131). And indeed, *Me and Ruby Fruit* runs for five minutes and thirty seconds (five minutes being the length of one tape, the additional 30 seconds are due to the initial title insert, not shot on pixelvision and obviously added afterwards); the soundtrack is recorded directly on camera and hence accompanied by a considerable whirring noise emitted by the camera's recording mechanism; the in-camera edits are distinctive and appear "as a visible jagged line cutting across the screen, a visible result of pressing the stop button on the camera […]" (ibid: 137). Compared to the rough-and-readiness of Benning's early work with pixelvision, in her films following *Me and Rubyfruit*, she abandoned this crude primitivism. In *Girl Power* (1992), for example, one of her most acclaimed and more accessible videos, there are no more in-camera edits and the music has been added

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

carefully by post-synchronization. Instead of regarding such 'impure' practice as being against the 'true' spirit of pixelvision, or as a mark of indifference to the medium and its specific qualities, we should rather take them as a challenge to rethink our concept of medium specificity and its meaning within the media landscape of the 1990s.

—————— Michael Almereyda frankly admits [6] that when he began his first pixelvision project, *Another Girl Another Planet* (1992, **fig.1-2**), he drew inspiration from Sadie Benning's videos. Without a producer and having only a modest budget, he decided to make an hour-long film about "two messed-up young men and their involvement with perhaps too many young women" (Almereyda 1993: 2). This East Village chamber drama (the action is confined to two apartments, a stairwell, and a roof) enthusiastically exploits the format's blurry images and even re-enforces them by the ubiquitous cigarette smoke of the characters, thereby creating additional on-screen blur. The soundtrack consists of voice-overs and music. Almereyda chose pixelvision partly for economic reasons, but nevertheless appreciated its aesthetic qualities: "[...] it's necessary to compose shots with an eye to-

wards compressed space, to stage action with an awareness of how silhouettes register and relate to one another, and to favor close-ups [...]" (Almereyda 1993: 3). The shooting was based on a script and a storyboard; the actors – except for Almereyda's neighbor who agreed to play himself – were professionals. Moreover, not willing to accept the limitations of pixelvision, a series of simple, but far-reaching technical adjustments were made. First, Almereyda and his crew modified the lens, for many the unique aspect of the PXL2000. But not enough: another feature of the format, the recording of visual information onto audio tape was bypassed by wiring the PXL2000 to a conventional VCR unit in order to better control the shooting. Furthermore, Almereyda neither made use of the in-built mike and the possibility of direct sound recording, nor did he edit in-camera. Image and

061

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

sound were recorded separately and finally edited at a more or less well-equipped video editing studio. Eventually, the only element of the PXL2000 not touched was the camera's sensor. Strangely enough, all these manipulations, modifications and media transfers – including the final blow-up to 16mm-film and its eventual transfer to DVD – are far from vitiating pixelvision's specific look. The film's distinct physicality manifests itself in an evocatively grainy image, which echoes the main character's hazy memories, when he thinks back on relationships with girlfriends past (Kipp 2003: 4). The title *Another Girl Another Planet* was inspired by the eponymous song of the British band The Only Ones, but does not appear in the film itself, though music does play a prominent role. The filmmaker's passion for alternative tunes is exemplified by the inclusion of performers like Marianne Faithful, Ike Turner, Nick Cave, Psychic TV and Lefty Frizell. Their vocal performances activate what Roland Barthes called "the grain of the voice," which lets us hear the very materiality of the performer's body, "the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages," as Barthes elaborates (1977: 181). Many recordings are contemporary, though they do not conform to the polished sound of the post-dolby era. The audible articulations of the human body, perceptible in the performers' voices and the technological audibility of the recording equipment contribute to the affective charge of Almereyda's soundtrack.
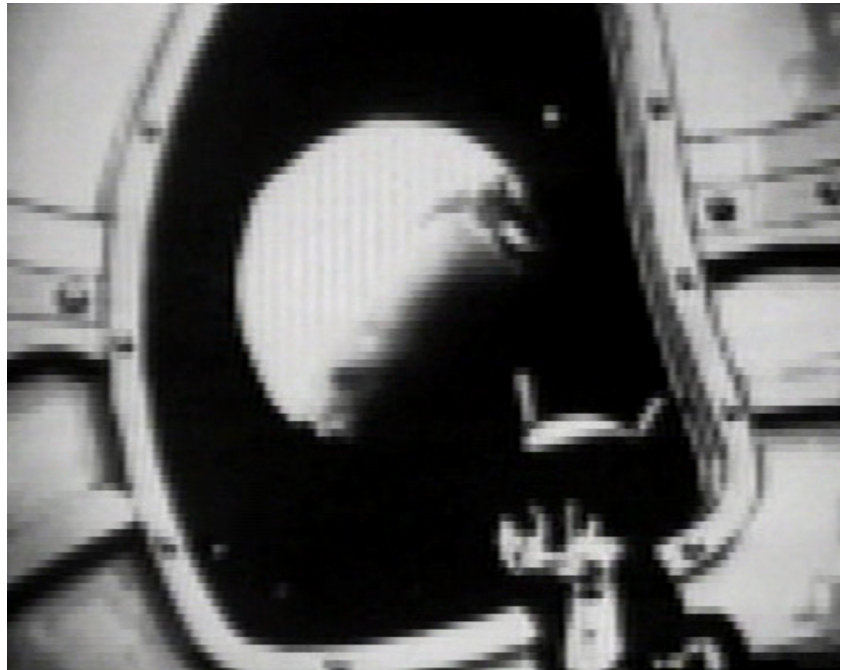
_____ The superimposition of different layers of temporality can also be seen in *Another Girl Another Planet*'s references to the history of cinema. The film includes scenes from a 1935 Max Fleischer cartoon called *Dancing on the Moon*, watched by the film's characters on TV, as well as verbal references to *Buongiorno, elefante!*, a 1952 Italian comedy directed by Gianni Franciolini, in which Vittorio de Sica plays a teacher struggling to take care of his family. An Indian prince visits Italy and gives the De Sica character a baby elephant named Sabu as a reward for showing him

// Figure 2
Michael Almereyda: Another Girl Another Planet (1992). Scene from *Dancing on the Moon*. PXL2000 video, sound.

062

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

around. In Almereyda's film, Sabu materializes – indeed, it is a real elephant in a real apartment – as the embodiment of an impossible dream and wishful thinking, as the filmmaker explains.[7] One could argue that the decision to include an elephant in the film also offered the unique possibility of pixelvision encountering the highly tactile quality of an elephant's skin. Wrinkled, furrowed and marked with ridged creases, the pachyderm's epidermis seems to be the perfect profilmic object for a camera that delivers with startling detail "the exact grain of any surface" (Almereyda 1993: 3). The texture of the elephant skin viewed in close-up shifts our attention from an optic toward a haptic materiality and leads us to think the visual in a material way.

———— Peggy Ahwesh works in a variety of media, including Super-8 and 16mm-film, and both analog and digital video, but is equally interested in appropriating unusual tools and materials, such as surveillance cameras or footage from video games. More recently, she has experimented with a heat-sensitive camera and a 360 degree camera.[8] Her openness towards unconventional technologies brought her in touch with pixelvision in the early 1990s. She found the camera to be best suited for *Strange Weather* (1993, co-made with Margie Strosser, **fig.3-4**), a 50-minute fiction film about crack addicts during a hurricane, set and shot in Florida. As Ahwesh explained to Scott MacDonald: "I wasn't sure how *Strange Weather* was going to work out, so I went to Florida with a surveillance camera, a Super-8 camera, and a Pixil camera. […] I knew that with the Pixil camera I would be able to make overly dramatic things look *under*dramatic, and things that were nothing to look at, spectacular and tactile – and the drug world look grim and raw. I thought, 'Degraded and grainy, Pixil will give me the right texture'" (Ahwesh in MacDonald 2006: 129).

// Figure 3
**Peggy Ahwesh with Margie Strosser:
Strange Weather (1993). PXL2000
video, sound.**

———— Ahwesh's high awareness of pixelvision's specific material qualities did not prevent her from modifying the camera and adapting it to her own needs. As in Almereyda's case, she did not use an audio tape in the PXL2000 but connected it to a VHS-deck and

063

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

a TV monitor in order to have more versatility and control during the production. Also, the editing was done afterwards to avoid any messy editing glitch, although she appreciates it, as she concedes.[9]

Ahwesh's obvious lack of interest in any kind of 'purism' can also be sensed in her merging of fiction and documentary. Despite the fact that *Strange Weather* was scripted and staged mainly with professional actors, it is profoundly marked by a documentary realism. Its hybrid aesthetics is, on the one hand, due to the gritty black and white of pixelvision, and on the other, deliberately woven in by the filmmaker. *Strange Weather* tracks four young drug addicts during a single afternoon as they

wait for a hurricane to hit. Towards the end, a blond girl gives a long speech about the first time she used crack. This scene was rehearsed many times and then shot in a single eight-minute take. As Ahwesh argues, "It's a cliché from cinema vérité that the longer a shot goes on without a cut, the more believable it is as reality" (Ahwesh in MacDonald 2006: 127). This constant oscillation between fiction and documentary is one of the most gripping aspects of her film. As the example with the long take makes clear, in order to interlace document and fiction (or, at least, the codes indicative of them), Ahwesh necessarily had to overcome the limitations of Pixelvision, especially the use of audio cassettes, which would have allowed only five minutes of uncut footage to be recorded. In other words, to realize her artistic goal, she had to abandon what purists would call the "medium specificity" of Pixelvision. Another interesting point is how Ahwesh makes use of a format often labelled 'kid's stuff' by both practitioners and critics. Here again, Ahwesh does not hesitate to contaminate the 'high' with the 'low': a serious topic (drug addiction) is explored via a 'not serious' means (a toy camera).

Ahwesh was formed by the 1970s. She comes out of "feminism and the anti-art sensibility of punk" (Ahwesh in MacDonald 2006: 121), not unlike Sadie Benning, who, two decades later, was formed by second-wave feminism and the post-punk spirit of "riot grrrl." Though overt gender issues seem to play no role in Michael

064

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

Almereyda's work, *Another Girl Another Planet*'s urgency, raw-
ness and DIY-attitude unequivocally testify to the punk sensibility,
dear to all three filmmakers working with pixelvision.

A DEVOTION TO THE MINOR _____ As Peggy Ahwesh declared,
"working in Super-8 is a devotion to the minor, to the low end
of technology, to things that are more ephemeral and have less
authority in the world" (Ahwesh in MacDonald 2006: 126). The
same might be said even more rightly of Pixelvision. The term
"minor" was introduced by Tom Gunning in discussing the new
generation of avant-garde filmmakers who emerged from the
1980s onwards. Gunning himself borrowed it from Gilles Deleuze
and Félix Guattari's study *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature*:
"There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor.
To hate all languages of masters" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 26).
According to Gunning, "[m]inor literature remains aware of, and
celebrates, its marginal identity, fashioning from it a revolutio-
nary consciousness. [...] [A minor cinema] assert[s] no vision of
conquest, make[s] no claims to hegemony. [It] reshapes our image
of the avant-garde, moving away from its image of shock troop bat-
talions" (1989: 2). Ten years later, uncomfortable with the mastery
implied in masterworks, Catherine Russell declared: "We need to
shift the emphasis from 'great works' to 'examplary texts'" (1999:
22). And in 2005, William C. Wees entitles an article that looked
back at the avant-garde of the 1980s and 1990s "No More Giants."
_____ The idea of mastery is intimately related to the principles of
orthodox high modernism, best exemplified by Structural Film,
which was much more than a temporary movement, but a kind of
"International Style" (Gunning 1989: 2). This is clearly seen in the
canonization politics of the influential *Anthology Film Archives*,
whose "Manifesto" was published in *The Essential Cinema* (1975),
edited by P. Adams Sitney. Here, the selection committee [10] – all
male, by the way – declared: "Anthology Film Archives is philoso-
phically oriented toward the *pure* film [...]" (Sitney 1975: XI). In
the given context, "pure" meant an exclusive concentration on the
medium's formal properties – to the detriment of any extra-textual
consideration.
_____ Pixelvision, however, partakes in the minor, as defined by
Gunning. Moreover, this bastard of audio and video without any
aesthetic lineage represents the underground of underground.
The use that filmmakers like Benning, Almereyda and Ahwesh
make of the format lacks the self-reflexive impetus characteristic

065

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

of earlier generations of experimental filmmakers. The works described above refuse the notion of cinematic purity and embrace instead an impure, contaminated practice, one not regulated by modernism's norms. More often than not, these filmmakers either modify the equipment, adapting it according to their needs, or they mix formats. Unlike the earlier generation, they are not willing to let formalism gain the upper hand above subject matter. The willingness rather to privilege the minor can rightly be understood as a political gesture, a deconstruction of hierarchical oppositions in favor of the under-privileged term (in this case, the minor, the low, the poor). As compared to the exclusionary ethics of high modernism, these filmmakers' attitude is more inclusive in regards to the choice of their filmmaking tools as well as the use they make of them. The fact that the limitations of the medium need not necessarily be respected but rather deliberately disregarded, demonstrates a commitment to the spirit of punk and a rejection of mastery and paternal authority. It also can be read as a changed understanding of what medium specificity might mean in altered media conditions.

REASSESSING MEDIUM SPECIFICITY _____ Seen historically, the demand to maintain a medium's 'purity' – that is, the emphasis on its medium-specific qualities – has gained in importance whenever a new medium strove for recognition as an art form. This was the case in Europe during the 1920s, when the cinematic avant-garde stopped imitating the established arts of literature and theater and began instead to rely on its own 'essential' qualities; this was true also in the United States after 1945, when film had to hold its own in the face of painting. The US avant-gardes, in comparison with those of Europe in the 1920s, went a step further in their purism. There the trend was not just towards refusing non-specifically cinematographic codes such as verbal language, narration, or even music, but even towards reducing specifically cinematographic codes to their material base (Wollen 1982: 197). In this regard, the 'essence' of the film medium was located in its physical characteristics, particularly in the filmstrip, the camera, projector, and screen, a tendency, which achieved its highpoint with the aforementioned Structural Film of the late 1960s and 1970s.

_____ What we call "medium specificity" is not evidentially uncontroversial, but open to debate. According to Erika Balsom (2013), despite all recent attempts to abandon the notion of medium specificity, the term is still useful, but has to be reassessed in the context

066

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

of digitization and media convergence. For a contemporary understanding of medium specificity, it is necessary to give up "the old fiction of the purity of media" and to consider "interpenetration and contamination" (Balsom 2013: 74). Instead of locating medium specificity in the material base of the apparatus, as the discourse of Structural Film had suggested, Balsom favors another conception of medium specificity, one grounded in film's "ability to register a trace of pastness" (ibid: 77). Instead of forging self-reflexive systems in order to achieve an artwork's autonomy, "[n]ow, on the contrary, film's medium specificity lies in its ability to point beyond itself, in the assertion of its radical *lack* of autonomy by indexing the past" (ibid). The indexical trace is intimately allied with the extra-textual realm of objects. Hence, art practices based on the trace challenge conceptions of "autonomy" and "purity" and can be considered alternatives to high modernist claims of purity (Jutz 2010: 36).

———— Nevertheless, the question of pixelvision's bond to reality, and therefore its ability to register a trace of pastness, needs a more articulated investigation into the ontological status of this mode of reproduction as compared to the photochemical mode, on which the discourse of the trace was originally based. Pixelvision's ontology is complicated by the fact that it is a hybrid of (early) digital and analog modes of reproduction. The analogical mode "transcribes before it represents" (Rodowick 2007: 78), whereas the digital mode implies a transcoding process from light or sound waves into digits or codes. Giovanna Fossati (2009) rephrases the debate, analog versus digital, to a debate among media, that is, between those which are immediately intelligible for the observer and can be called "isomorphic," and those, which require transcoding to allow intelligibility: "From this perspective also analog sound waves (or the analog video images) transcribed onto a magnetic tape would not be isomorphic, as the magnetic signal cannot be directly interpreted as sound or moving images by our senses. Also in this case a sort of transcoding process has occurred, even though within the 'continuous' physical domain. Magnetic tapes, but also analog television, may well be considered part of a non-isomorphic representation process, even though they provide analog (continuous) representations" (ibid: 18). It cannot be denied that pixelvision offers a different form of representation than photochemical film. Pixelvision's particular ontological status, though based on transcribing, and non-isomorphic, might be seen as a loosening of its bond with reality. Even if it is true that pixelvision does not register the indexical trace in the same way as photochemical systems do,

067

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

it is nevertheless able to "point beyond itself" (Balsom 2013: 77), and to embrace the extra-textual and thereby to stand for an anti-autonomous conception of medium specificity.

_____ Indeed, the PXL2000 Camcorder's manual itself encourages a non-specific use of the medium by recommending direct recording to a video tape or transferring recorded material from the PXL2000 audio tape to a video tape, and describes in detail how this can be done.[11] This is to say that a 'purist' use of the PXL2000 never was intended or envisioned – not even by its makers! The use artists such as Benning, Almereyda and Ahwesh made of pixelvision in the early 1990s comes very close to a conception of medium specificity that foregrounds transition, transformation and contamination. Their videos tell narratives about continuous transformations, the migration of images and sounds from one format into another. And this is precisely where pixelvision's medium specificity can be located – in its *inherently transitional nature*, a feature this dated format shares with audiovisual artifacts in our current media condition.

CONCLUSION: THE NEWNESS OF A DATED FORMAT _____ Today, all content produced by technical media can be converted into digital data. Hence, transformation is at the heart of our contemporary media constellation and offers, as Fossati argues, "the most appropriate and productive term to define the process that film is undergoing at the moment" (2009: 20). The critical engagement with pixelvision, a genuinely hybrid format, can not only contribute, as Tom Gunning put it, "[to grasping] the newness of old technologies" (2003: 303), but also to shedding light on a theorization of the contemporary media scape, one that is marked by conversion, transfer and transformation.

_____ The timeliness of this untimely format also lies in its capacity to embody matters of texture and time, further attesting to its multiple trajectories. If transformation is an inherent property of contemporary media, pixelvision is its avant-garde. With every transfer – for example, from the initial audio tape to video tape, to 16mm-film to digital file, and so on – resolution diminishes. The constant migration of images from one format to another builds up layer over layer, and these layers materially document the uses the artist has made of the format as well as the history of the copy's circulation. The multiple transformations a PXL2000 video has undergone are manifest on its surface and can be regarded as, in Giordana Bruno's phrase, "an archive of temporalities"

068

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

(2014: 121). Moreover, all these transfers add textural quality and hapticity and serve as a reminder of cinema's initial tactile quality of vision. According to Walter Benjamin, film's tactility was due to montage and the constant and sudden change of shots it provoked, which "periodically assail[ed] the spectator" (1973: 238). However, Thomas Elsaesser points out that already during the early 1920s cinema had lost its initial tactility, as Benjamin had argued, and "acquired its own aura: that of glamor and total specular entrancement" (Elsaesser 1996: 17). During the 1980s, the small-gauge format Super-8 raised again the question of haptic vision, though not by means of montage, but by means of its very texture, not unlike pixelvision in the 1990s. These minor mediums' tactile visuality can be seen as a revenant of film's initial shock effect, ascribed by Benjamin to the young film medium. From this perspective, pixelvision's provocative textural quality, enhanced by its transitional nature, would point to a lost past. At the same time, haptic vision describes the ongoing desire for textured surfaces, under threat of disappearance due to the fetishization of high resolution.

––––– An engagement with pixelvision would be incomplete without considering the institutional and economic determinations of the format. In this regard, Jonathan Walley offers a useful distinction between the tradition of "filmmakers's films" on the one hand, and that of "artists' films" on the other, which represent two entirely different economic models: "The key difference is in how avant-garde film and artists' film regard the tangible, material object that film-making produces: the print. Whereas the limited number of prints avant-garde film-makers strike is a function of their extraordinarily low budgets, in artists' film prints are purposefully scarce, as scarcity is what makes them valuable in the art market. [...] Simply put, artists' film regards the film print as an art object in a way that avant-garde cinema does not. The same medium used in two different modes of film practice is subject to strikingly different processes based on distinct conceptions of its materials" (Walley 2008: 187). The videos of Benning, Almereyda and Ahwesh can be clearly situated in the tradition of "filmmakers's films." They completely lack the sense of purposeful scarcity (a means of traditional bourgeois value-creation) and instead favor an attitude of open access. While Sadie Benning's films were originally distributed on VHS, Michael Almereyda offers a DVD, and Peggy Ahwesh disseminates her films on the internet platform *vimeo*.

069

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

‾‾‾‾ During the 1990s, pixelvision, this low-end version of ana-log video, appealed to artists with counter-cultural, subversive and radical agendas. Its particular aesthetics escaped not only the institutional and economic determinations of the art market, but also the commercializations of vintage culture and nostalgia. Less commodifiable than other formats, pixelvision tells the story of an artistic practice – without aesthetic lineage and not striving for either autonomy or mastery – that can rightly be regarded as political. Pixelvision encourages the conversion from one format into another, which is, at the same time, the defining characteristic of our contemporary digital culture. Though a dated format, its inherently transitional nature allows for a rethinking of materiality and temporality within the framework of transformation, so crucial for our current media constellation. Pixelvision's topicality lies (among other areas) in its capacity to reshape questions of medium specificity in the face of convergence, thus enhancing its relevance to the contemporary moment.

// **Image credits**

Fig.1-2: Michael Almereyda: Another Girl Another Planet (1992). PXL2000 video, sound. Video still courtesy of the artist.
Fig.3-4: Peggy Ahwesh with Margie Strosser: Strange Weather (1993). PXL2000 video, sound. Video still courtesy of the artist.

// **References**

Almereyda, Michael (1993): My Stunning Future: The Luxuries of Pixelvision. Originally published in Projections, n° 3 (1993)
http://fleetingjoy.fishbucket.com/writing.php?id=5, last accessed November 4, 2016)
Balsom, Erika (2013): Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press
Barthes, Roland (1977): The Grain of the Voice. In: Image, Music, Text. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, pp. 179-189
Benjamin, Walter (1973): The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In: Illuminations. trans. Harry Zohn, pp. 217-251. New York: Schocken Books
Birtwistle, Andy (2010): Cinesonica: Sounding Film and Video. Manchester: Manchester University Press
Bruno, Giuliana (2014): Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (1986): Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature. trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
Elsaesser, Thomas (1996): Dada/Cinema? In: Kuenzli, Rudolf E. (ed.): Dada and Surrealist Film. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 13-27
Fossati, Giovanna (2009): From Grain to Pixel. The Archival Life of Film in Transition. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press
Gunning, Tom (1989–1990): Towards a Minor Cinema: Fonoroff, Herwitz, Ahwesh, Klahr and Solomon. In: Motion Picture. Vol. 3, issues 1-2, pp. 2-5
Gunning, Tom (2003): Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology, from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century. In: Thorburn, David/Jenkins, Henry (eds.): Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 39-60
Hoberman, J. (1991): The Super-80s. In: Vulgar Modernism. Writing on Movies and Other Media. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 129-136
Holmlund, Chris (2002): The Films of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich. In: Dixon, Wheeler Winston/Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey (eds.): Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader. New

070

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

York: Routledge, pp. 299-312

Jenkins, Henry (2006): Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press

Johnson, Chloé Hope (2009): Becoming-Grrrl. The Voice and Videos of Sadie Benning. In: Columpar, Corinn/Mayer, Sophie (eds.): There She Goes. Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 172-182

Jutz, Gabriele (2016): Audio-Visual Aesthetics in Contemporary Experimental Film. In: Kaduri, Yael (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Western Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 397-425

Jutz, Gabriele (2010): Cinéma brut. Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde. Wien, New York: Springer

Kipp, Jeremiah (2003): Michael Almereyda. In: Senses of Cinema. Issue 25. http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/almereyda/, last accessed November 4, 2016

MacDonald, Scott (2006): A Critical Cinema, vol. 5. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 111-142

Marks, Laura (2015): Hanan al-Cinema. Affections for the Moving Image. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

McCarty, Nina (2005): Toying with Obsolescence: Pixelvision Filmmakers and the Fisher Price PXL 2000 Camera. Unpublished master thesis. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Comparative Media Studies

Rodowick, D. N. (2007): The Virtual Life of Film. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

PXL2000 Manual: https://www.flickr.com/photos/nickledndimed/sets/72157594402812643, last accessed October 31, 2016

Russell, Catherine (1999): Experimental Ethnography. The Work of Film in the Age of Video. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Sitney, P. Adams (ed.) (1975): The Essential Cinema. Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives. Volume One. New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press

Steyerl, Hito (2009): In Defense of the Poor Image. In: e-flux journal. Issue 10. https://ninebyten.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/poor-images.pdf, last accessed November 4, 2016

Walley, Jonathan (2008): Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde. In: Leighton, Tanya (ed.): Art and the Moving Image. A Critical Reader. London: Tate Publishing and Afterall, pp. 182-199

Wees, William C. (2005): No More Giants. In: Petrolle, Jean/Wright Wexman, Virginia (eds): Women & Experimental Filmmaking. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press

Wollen, Peter (1982): Readings and Writings. Semiotic Counter-Strategies. London: Verso

// About the Author

Gabriele Jutz is professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She has also taught at Freie Universität Berlin, and at Wolfgang von Goethe University Frankfurt. Her most recent work deals with obsolescence and image/sound relationships in experimental film. She is part of the international research team for the Austrian Science Fund project "RESET THE APPARATUS! Retrograde Technicity in Photographic and Cinematic Practices." Selected publications: Cinéma Brut. Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde. Vienna, New York: Springer 2010; Audio-Visual Aesthetics in Contemporary Experimental Film. In: Kaduri, Yael (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Western Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 397-425; Retrograde Technicity and the Cinematic Avant-Garde: Towards a New Dispositif of Production. In: Gaudreault, André/Lefebvre, Martin (eds.): Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry. Cinéma & Technologie / Cinema & Technology. Vol. 31, issues 1-2-3 (2011), 75-94.

071

"MAN THERE AIN'T NO FILM IN THAT SHIT"
MATERIALITY, TEMPORALITY AND POLITICS OF PIXELVISION VIDEO

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

WUTLAND
HENRIKE NAUMANNS EDITION FÜR FKW 61

// HENRIKE NAUMANN
WUTLAND
BUCHSTABEN AUS GEFÄLSCHTEN LANDSER-JOGGINGANZÜGEN
AUF 90ER-JAHRE JUGENDZIMMERTEPPICH
35 X 25 CM, 2017

// Katrin Köppert

FURNITURING THE FUTURE:
HENRIKE NAUMANN'S PIECE OF CARPET

Mohammad Zatareih, who in 2015 initiated the March of Hope[1] in response to Hungary's disastrous refugee policies, now lives in Zwickau, from where the terror cell Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU) planned the racially motivated murders of nine Turkish and Greek Germans[2] from 2000 to 2007. Close to Zwickau is the city Hof, where in 1989 13,600 GDR refugees were welcomed after they had left the GDR by way of Prague. At the main station in Hof the refugees of the GDR were applauded, just as those from Syria and other states of the Middle East were in Munich after the March of Hope seemingly came to an end. That the arrival in Germany was not the end of their journey towards a better, a safer life, and that the promise of being happy was played on to redescribe Western social norms as universal social goods (Ahmed 2010: 2) has already been the experience of former GDR refugees. Their dreams of living in a state of no borders and no walls were turned into a sad joke. Though they could travel freely and talk openly, they were held back by social, economic and emotional restraints. The history of the GDR refugees and the processing of the GDR as such is one of the best practical examples of disintegration and non-participation. The vacuum that was left after the annexation[3] of the GDR was instead filled with extreme ambivalences within the population; ambivalences forming the basis of skepticism, envy and racism, both then and now. The complexity of being the victims of Western ideology and of incriminating those not belonging to it is what Henrike Naumann puts at the center of her art.

A PIECE OF CARPET _____ A piece of carpet, grey, cut off by green-yellow-blue-red lines. On top of it characters in the typography of Gothic print, which was idealized during the rule of National Socialism. The characters, forming the word "Wut-Land," are arranged above the cut out of a stencil showing a face that once belonged to a Wehrmacht soldier. The carpet, taken from a vanished space near Henrike Naumann's birthplace Zwickau and reused in her solo-exhibition "Aufbau Ost,"[4] serves as the canvas for the characters taken from sweatshirts from the now illegal neo-Nazi Band "Landser."[5] Western insignia like interior

furnishings that flooded eastern Germany shortly after German reunification and that stand in for the sell-out of social values and everyday commodities of the GDR are combined here with National Socialist emblems. By assembling the leftovers of the postmodern aesthetic of the everyday and the brutal politics of neo-Nazis, the montage hits the center of ongoing discussions about Saxony as the breeding ground for what today can be perceived as the normalization of right-wing and nationalist ideology in Germany. But what, other than simply though relentlessly pointing out that it is no coincidence that NSU, Pegida & Co. evolved in Saxony, is Henrike Naumanns approach? Here it seems revealing to bring in questions of materiality.

TOXIC LETTERS ———— Henrike Naumann wants the audience to put itself into a political position by physically entering the spatial installation or touching the materials from which the art piece is made. She relates to questions of materiality and touchability not just since she herself seems to like touching her own youth by feeling the materials of all the weird stuff that flooded apartments shortly after the fall (when I stumbled into her atelier she greeted me with a strident 'piece of art' in her hands: a lilac Salvador Dali-like clock that instantly catapulted me into my teenage bedroom). But also because material relations somehow speak to complex entanglements of societal systems, even more: they co-produce them.
———— To make this clear it is necessary to mention that the sweatshirts, out of which the characters were cut, were supposed to serve as the material she wanted to manipulate in order to create the edition for FKW in the first place. But since the fabric of the sweaters is made of unknown, but seemingly crazy materials, she was not able to transform their color by chemicals or their design by gluing on rhinestones. So the material of the sweater acted out and forced her not just to rethink her idea for the edition, but rather to dig deep into the stories the agentiality of the materials were telling her. Here I rely on those posthumanist approaches that try to think "more-than-human agencies that matter as an intra-active force of practices of worlding" (Gorska 2016: 148). This, I suppose, cannot be dropped laterally. So let me sketch this briefly.
———— Thinking art through material agencies of materials like fabric and chemicals enables "to understand them not as objects but as agential forces of knowledge production" (ibid: 159). With the agency of materials a sort of knowledge is produced that allows us to capture the worlding and with it the dynamism

074

and steady transformation of power relations in everyday life. But – please – don't get me wrong at this point. By saying that material agentiality helps to relate to steady transformations one should not get the impression that it is all about a non-situated vitality, a flow, no matter what and in which specific arrangement. Every agential move of matter is to be understood in the spatiotemporal, material and linguistic-discursive specificity and situatedness of its processuality. We can thus understand the agential move of the sweater only within its embeddedness in geopolitical, social and eco-economic dynamics. So by acting out in terms of withdrawing from the subject-centered dealing with materials, the fabric not only helps to reorient the artist's approach, but indicates the dynamic power relations within the processes of the present assemblage of eastern Germany. And what is that assemblage all about?

_____ Naumann bought the sweater at the market in Johanngeorgenstadt, where Vietnamese migrants sell illegal copies of illegal fashion brands of neo-Nazi bands like "Landser." And that is not a bad joke. Those markets are well known for the sale of highly synthetic and cheaply produced clothes by marginalized and underpaid migrant traders. Forced to survive in a globalized world they non-intentionally feed the emotional hunger of East Germans for nationalist identification. At the same time the toxicity of the fabrics, which reached out to Nauman in the moment of trying to adopt them for her artwork and which thus produce an awareness of global ecological conditions of production and consumption, somehow enmesh the bodies of the sellers and the consumers. By the potentiality of vulnerability through toxicity a proximity of just seemingly separate subject positions is created. Would we have considered this non-obvious relation without also having sensed the knowledge of materials agentiality?

_____ By refusing to react only to the authorship of the artist and by having their own, though non-teleological agenda, the synthetics – though in intra-activity with the artist's thoughts and worlds – reveal the inter-relationality of current environmental and health-related impacts of globalized markets and the GDR's history of producing trashy chemical fibres. Moreover, they, entangled with Naumann's political interest, enable an understanding of the simultaneities of contradictory relations that were set up in the GDR and are reinforced today. Then: chemical textile technologies (DeDeRon & Co) met petty bourgeois ruralness, toxins met the remote romanticism of familial living in 'Schrebergärten'; today: plastic-facade-engineering meets abandoned buildings, crystal meth meets 'Nazis im Vogtland.'

075

Acknowledging materials being a "force among forces" (Braidotti 2006: 5) we are enabled to become sensible towards the political layers in their processes of co-production, that is, in their processual coexistence of nature and culture (Haraway 2008: 56). Maybe the cultivation of this sensibility (Bennett 2010) or awareness describes what we might call the political of agential materiality or – to put it differently – where material agency becomes political insofar as we can sensually learn to perceive proximity where it is expected the least. From there on new worlds might be created. We might reconsider creativity within the arts with this kind of politicalness. Responsivity might be understood as a form of creativity (Coole 2014: 48). And creativity becomes the mode not of mastery, but of queer intimacy.

FLOATING MATERIALITY ⸺ The characters almost seem to float on the carpet. Don't they touch the carpet? Is the carpet digitally manipulated? Or is it literally the carrier of the characters, the material environment of what the political stance of the Nazi-ish designed words suggests it to be? Is the carpet as a synecdoche for the aesthetic of the vacuum after the fall of the Berlin Wall and before the universalization of globalization and neoliberalism the template for racist radicalization? Is the furniture the entry point, to be perceived materially, of how we can understand nationalist and right-wing ideology in Saxony nowadays?

⸺ The toxic characters, which Henrike Naumann ultimately cut out of the stubborn sweaters and pinned on the carpet, affect the piece of carpet as the materialization of hopeful emotions and imaginations of a better future. They turn the carpet, and with it the hopes, into trash. Even more: The conviction, that all those hopes have always been trash, that they have always been what Western Germany has scrapped, brutally materializes. So yes, to look at the carnal aesthetics of the everyday like furniture, carpets, and sweaters can be of help in grasping ambiguous histories.

⸺ At the same time, transforming the carpet not just into the canvas, but the embodied image revaluates furniture. Furniture becomes the matter of reimagining a future. A future might come by at least reaffirming some parts of GDR's history like the everyday, the ordinary, the profane. This means that everyday items become the flat surface, the virtuality of a future that may come.

⸺ The open-ended-ness of future feeds the mode of reaffirming the past by undoing it instead of controlling it. That the GDR under the umbrella of anti-fascism failed to question its nationalism

076

right at the moment of yelling "Wir sind das Volk" has often been and still is the practice of controlling the past. Naumann explicitly addresses the pitfall of the disguise of the shift from a peaceful revolution to a movement of national-minded folks instead of oppositional positions against what has been called the 'natural' outcome of the "The Change": namely the "Volk." So reaffirming might mean being affected by the profane materiality, which is not fully occupied by right-wing ideology. Thus the letters on the carpet do not look as if they were irrecoverably branded on the carpet. They rather seem to float. Hence I do think that Naumann is making an argument about processes of affect as processes of floating materiality. Because of the floating instability of agential materials matter does not just matter and does not just "weigh on some bodies more than others" (Chen 2012: 187), but rather demonstrates that categories of class, race or migration are unstable. Though theories of the instability of categories and identities like queer and nomadic theory have often been deployed by neoliberal agendas of plurality and diversity, I would still like to embrace their potentiality to open up imaginaries of futures beyond fixed assumptions in the present. Responding to and speaking with floating materiality does not contradict taking a tough political stance. And art spaces still and again need to be furniture stores of political stances. Art needs the political furnituring of the future more than ever. Henrike Naumann's art is a best-practice example, an important one.

// References

Ahmed, Sara (2010): The promise of happiness. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
Bennett, Jane (2010): Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
Braidotti, Rosi (2006): Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity. In: Rhizomes. 11/12, Fall 2005/2006, http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html, last accessed January 11, 2017
Chen, Mel Y. (2012): Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
Coole, Diana (2014): Wir brauchen eine wesentlich bessere Einschätzung der materiellen Strukturen. In: Witzgall, Susanne/Stakemeier, Kerstin (eds.): Macht des Materials – Politik der Materialität. Zürich: diaphanes, pp. 47-51
Górska, Magdalena (2016): Breathing Matters. Feminist Inter-Sectional Politics of Vulnerability. Linköping: Linköping University Press
Haraway, Donna (2008): When Species Meet. Posthumanities. Vol. 3. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
Stephan, Inge (1997): Medea, meine Schwester? Medea-Texte von Autorinnen im 20. Jahrhundert. In: Henn, Marianne/Hufeisen, Britta (eds.): Frauen: MitSprechen, MitSchreiben. Beiträge zur literatur- und sprachwissenschaftlichen Frauenforschung. Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Heinz, pp. 1-12
Wolf, Christa (2010): Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp

077

// **About the Author**
Katrin Köppert is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Media Theory, University of Art and Design Linz. She studied Gender Studies and German Literature at the Humboldt University of Berlin and was a doctoral scholarship holder from the DFG-research program "Gender as a Category of Knowledge." Her PhD is on *Queer Pain in (Vernacular) Photography Post-War & Pre-Stonewall*. Her main research areas are queer theory, affect studies and political emotions, visual culture, popular culture, history of photography and media, post- and decolonial media theory. Her last co-edited publication is: *I is for Impasse. Affektive Queerverbindungen in Theorie_Aktivismus_Kunst* (ed. Käthe von Bose, Ulrike Klöppel, Katrin Köppert, Karin Michalski, and Pat Treusch), Berlin: Berlin: b_books, 2015.

078

KATHRIN PETERS UND ANDREA SEIER, HG. (2016): GENDER & MEDIEN-READER. ZÜRICH, DIAPHANES.

Es muss zur Freude aller deutschsprachigen Wissenschaftler_innen sein, dass sich endlich jemand die Mühe gemacht hat, ein Kompendium mit – teilweise erstmals übersetzten – Texten herauszugeben, das starke Positionen der leidenschaftlichen Wechselbeziehung von Medienwissenschaft und Gender Studies versammelt. Kathrin Peters und Andrea Seier legen also mit dem im *diaphanes*-Verlag erschienenen *Gender & Medien-Reader* einen 600seitigen Ziegel vor, der einschlägige Texte einer nun mehr als ein halbes Jahrhundert andauernden Debatte fasst und zueinander ins Verhältnis setzt. Dass die Begriffe „Gender"[1] und „Medien" keinen eindeutigen Definitionen unterliegen, sondern vielmehr die fluide Verhandlungsbasis für „Problematisierungen" bilden, „die es nicht erlauben, sich auf eindeutige Gegenstände und Identitäten zu beziehen" (9), ist grundlegende Voraussetzung für die Zusammenstellung dieses Handbuchs.

_____ Einleitend formulieren die beiden Herausgeberinnen ganz klar die Ansprüche, die sie an den Reader stellen, nämlich „wichtige Stationen" der „Gender & Medien-Forschung" abzubilden „und dabei den Fokus vor allem auf Problemstellungen und heterogene Zugangsweisen zu richten" (17). Diese Herangehensweise impliziert „eine Befragung des Kanons" und damit eine Historisierung, die laut Seier und Peters vor allem zwei Perspektiven konstruiert: „die Auseinandersetzung mit medialen Repräsentationen und ihren genderpolitischen Bedeutungsebenen […] und die Beschäftigung mit der Frage, auf welche Geschlechtermodelle Medienkonzepte, Medienbestimmungen und Medienutopien […] zurückgreifen" (14). Historisierungen auf dem sich überlagernden Feld der Medienwissenschaft und Gender Studies vorzunehmen bedeutet auch, anzuerkennen, wie schnell sich die Perspektiven innerhalb der und auf die beiden Disziplinen erfreulicherweise verändern bzw. eine Aktualisierung einfordern.

_____ Die Auswahl der Texte, die von den 1950er Jahren bis in die Gegenwart reichen, zeichnet demnach keine lineare Geschichte der medienreflektierenden Gender Studies/genderkritischen Medienwissenschaft nach, sondern geht bewusst genealogisch vor. Peters und Seier legen Wert auf die Herausarbeitung diskursiver Schleifen, die mit jedem neuen Schwung erweiterte Erkenntnisse

in die Debatte hineintragen und sie gleichzeitig an den Ausgangspunkt rückbinden. „Dieses Kapitel beginnt und endet mit den 1950er-Jahren" (325), heißt es beispielsweise in der von Kathrin Peters verfassten Einleitung zum Themenkomplex „Zeichen, Dinge, Räume", der Marshall McLuhans theoretische Reflexion der Maschinenbräute und Vorstadtfrauen aus eben den 50er Jahren und Paul B. Preciados Engführung von Architektur, Medien und Gender am Beispiel der Playboy-Villa aus dem Jahr 2010 als diskursive Klammer aufspannt.

_____ Thematisch werden die ausgewählten Texte in Blöcken gefasst, die bestimmende Schwerpunktsetzungen der Verschränkung von Medienwissenschaft und Gender Studies vornehmen bzw. widerspiegeln. Der Reader eröffnet mit Beiträgen zur Feministischen Filmtheorie und endet mit richtungsweisenden Standpunkten zur Agency. Dieser Bogen vollzieht die Entwicklung theoretischer Positionen nach, die sich zunächst der De/Konstruktion von Welt widmen und sich weiter über repräsentationskritische, technowissenschaftliche, dinghafte Perspektiven und Konzeptualisierungen des Wissens zum Begriff der Agency hin bewegen. So findet eine diskursive Verschiebung statt: es gilt nicht mehr nur, Manifestationen von Macht und subversive Potentiale aus medialen Artefakten herauszulesen, sondern auch um die Erkenntnis, dass die Welt in ihrer materiellen Zusammensetzung immer schon queer war.

_____ Den Herausgeberinnen ist bewusst, dass eine Textauswahl auch immer Auslassungen und Lücken mit sich bringt. Um diese unvermeidlichen Einschnitte konstruktiv sichtbar zu machen, ist jedem Themenblock eine Einleitung vorangestellt, die einerseits die zum Schwerpunkt ausgewählten Texte vorstellt und diese gleichzeitig mit anderen Schriften kontextualisiert, die keinen Platz mehr im Reader gefunden haben. Dieses Konzept funktioniert sehr gut, zumal Peters und Seier für jeden einzelnen Fokus eine ausgewiesene Spezialistin – und dazu gehören auch die Herausgeberinnen – auf dem jeweiligen Gebiet einleitende Worte haben verfassen lassen: Andrea B. Braidt für das Kapitel „Feministische Filmtheorie", Maja Figge für „Repräsentationskritik", Karin Harrasser für „Technowissenschaften" (allen, die immer noch zu faul waren, das _Cyborg Manifesto_ von Donna Haraway zu lesen, sei Harrassers pointierte Zusammenfassung wärmstens ans feministische Maschinenherz gelegt), Kathrin Peters für „Zeichen, Dinge, Räume", Ulrike Bergermann für „Wissensordnungen" und Andrea Seier für „Agency".

_____ Der Themenkomplex „Feministische Filmtheorien" beginnt
mit Claire Johnstons „Frauenfilm als Gegenfilm" (1973), einem
Plädoyer für die Freisetzung kollektiver Phantasien von Frauen,
um der sexistischen Ikonographie, die Frauenrollen sowohl im
Hollywoodkino als auch im „europäischen Kunstkino" prägt, das
Kino als attraktives Kampfmittel entgegenzusetzen. Laura Mulveys
paradigmatischer Essay „Visuelle Lust und narratives Kino" (1975)
schließt an diese Forderung an, befürwortet Mulvey doch die radi-
kale Zerstörung der den Mann befriedigenden Schaulust, die auf
ein weibliches Objekt abzielt bzw. von diesem hervorgebracht wird
(die "to-be-looked-at-ness"/das „Zum-Anschauen-Sein"). Mulvey
arbeitet heraus, wie das Kino ein System von Repräsentationen aus-
bildet, das unbewusste patriarchale Gesellschaftsmuster bewusst
vervielfältigt und damit Männern eine aktive und Frauen eine pas-
sive Rolle auf den Leib schreibt. Heide Schlüpmanns „Kinosucht"
(1982) setzt sich mit den Zuschauerinnen im Frühen Kino aus-
einander, deren diverse Zusammensetzung Emilie Altenloh in ihrer
1914 veröffentlichten Studie zur „Soziologie des Kinos" erkannt
hat – im Gegensatz zu Siegfried Kracauer, der die „kleinen Laden-
mädchen" als Stellvertreterinnen für die Schar der Angestellten
begreifen wollte, die sich von Kino vereinnahmen lassen. Dass die
menschlichen Gegenstände des Interesses der feministischen Film-
theorie viel zu lange durch weiße Stars und weiße Zuschauer_innen
aus der Mittel- und Arbeiter_innenschicht repräsentiert wurden,
zeigt bell hooks in ihrem Essay „Der oppositionelle Blick. Schwarze
Frauen als Zuschauerinnen" von 1992 auf. hooks kritisiert die psy-
choanalytisch geprägte feministische Filmtheorie, die die weiße
Frau zur Sprecherin aller Frauen macht, und fordert die Aner-
kennung von Begehrensformen schwarzer Zuschauerinnenschaft,
die nicht geprägt sind von einem System, in dem schwarzen Men-
schen das Recht auf einen aktiven Blick gewaltsam abgesprochen
wird. Und dass im Kino nicht nur durch die visuelle Bezeichnung
des weiblichen Körpers Frau hervorgebracht wird, sondern auch
durch die Stimme, weiß Kaja Silverman („Die weibliche Stimme
entkörpern", 1984). Dementsprechend birgt eine Entkoppelung von
Stimme und körperlicher Repräsentation subversives Potential.
_____ Der Themenblock zur „Repräsentationskritik" eröffnet mit
Sander L. Gilmans „Schwarze Körper, weiße Körper. Zur Ikono-
grafie weiblicher Sexualität" (1985), ein Aufsatz, in dem der Autor
ikonographische Bilder der Schwarzen Frau (als animalische,
sexuell aktive Frau) und von Prostituierten im 19. Jahrhundert
untersucht, die übereinander gelegt werden, um anhand der

081

Darstellung sowohl aus medizinischer als auch aus sozialer Sicht stereotype Identitäten konstruieren. Gilmans Aufsatz wird ergänzt durch Richard Dyers Ausführungen über „Das Licht der Welt. Weiße Menschen und das Film-Bild" (1995), mittels derer Dyer die These aufstellt, dass die (technische) Entwicklung der Fotografie und des Films auf den weißen Körper als alles bestimmende Norm zurückzuführen ist. Abigail Solomon-Godeau nimmt in ihrem Aufsatz von 1987/1991 vor dem Hintergrund „der zunehmenden Spektakularisierung von Weiblichkeit" (Maja Figge, 114) die Betrachtung früher erotischer und pornographischer Fotografien in den Blick, während Douglas Crimp in seinem ebenso berührenden wie kämpferischen Aufsatz über „Porträts von Menschen mit AIDS" (1992) eine Kritik an medialen Bildern vornimmt, die Vorurteile und Stereotypisierungen in Hinblick auf „Risikogruppen" verstärken. Crimp fordert diversere Darstellungen, die auch ein sexuelles Begehren von Menschen mit AIDS/für Menschen mit AIDS ins Bewusstsein tragen. Jack Halberstam fordert in seiner Konzeption eines „Brandon-Teena-Archiv[s]" (2002) die Auseinandersetzung mit den politischen und sozialen Bedingungen eines ländlichen, und nicht urbanen Umfelds, in dem homosexuelle und queere Menschen leben. Diese Forderung ist geprägt von einer kritisch ausformulierten Unzufriedenheit gegenüber jenen medialen (Re)Präsentationen, die Brandon Teena beschreiben.

_____ Zum Beginn des Abschnitts „Technowissenschaften" fragt Allucquère Rosanne Stone 1991 „Würde sich der wirkliche Körper bitte erheben?" (Untertitel: „Grenzgeschichten über virtuelle Kulturen"), und knüpft an diese Forderung Beobachtungen darüber, wie „Telefon-Sexarbeiter_innen und Techniker_innen neuartige Zeichen und ‚physische' Imaginationsräume schaffen" (Harrasser, 219). Einen technisch verstärkten Imaginationsraum bzw. ein „Bedeutungsfeld" (Haraway, S. 250) bilden auch die „allgegenwärtigen Bilder von leuchtenden, frei schwebenden menschlichen Föten" (Haraway, 249), deren Bedingungen und Auswirkungen Haraway in „Fötus. Das virtuelle Spekulum in der Neuen Weltordnung" (1997) auf den Grund geht. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun führt in ihrem Essay „Über Software, oder: Die Beharrlichkeit visuellen Wissens" (2004) überzeugend aus, wie die Erfindung, Einführung und der Gebrauch von Software Prozesse der Maschine unter Behauptung einer Transparenz verschleiert und wie vergeschlechtliche Programmiersprachen sowohl Programmierer_innen als auch User_innen disziplinieren. Sprache ist auch ein Thema in Isabelle Stengers ebenso unterhaltsamem wie

aufschlussreichen Essay mit dem Titel „Wir sind nicht allein auf der Welt" (2006), in dem Stengers die berechtigte Frage stellt, wer denn eigentlich mit „man" gemeint sei, wenn man beispielsweise von einer Kollektivschuld spricht, die „man" für sich und andere formuliert. Stengers Ansatz besteht darin, Experimentalpraktiken, die sowohl die Anrufung der Hl. Jungfrau als auch die Bestimmung eines Neutrinos beinhalten können, nicht voneinander zu unterscheiden, da das eine nicht anders irrational ist als das andere. Die Ausführungen Stengers sind abwechselnd ausufernd und konzise, erhellend und verwirrend.

———— Der Abschnitt „Zeichen, Dinge, Räume" eröffnet mit drei Texten von Marshall McLuhan („Fließband der Liebes-Göttinnen/ Tarzan/Pferdeoper oder Seifenoper") aus dem Jahr 1951, in denen er anhand von Maschinenbräuten und Vorstadtfrauen die „Durchdringung von Sex und Technologie'" (Peters zitiert McLuhan, 328) untersucht. Christina von Braun wiederum analysiert in „Das Geschlecht der Zeichen" (1998) die Geschichte der Verknüpfung von Ritus, Schrift und Macht als Domäne des männlichen Vergeistigten, während Lynn Spigel in „Tragbares Fernsehen. Studien in häuslicher Raumfahrt" (2001) anhand von Printwerbungen für portables Fernsehen aus den 1950er und 1960er Jahren der „kulturellen Bedeutung von Portabilität" (Spigel, 366) nachgeht. Der Themenblock endet mit Paul B. Preciados bestechend argumentiertem Essay „Die Playboy-Villa. Die Erfindung des multimedialen Bordells" (2010), in dem Preciado unter Ausrufung des pharmakopornographischen Zeitalters anhand der Bauweise und medialen Vermarktung der Playboy-Mansion aufzeigt, wie wenig sich das „multimediale Bordell" als Disziplinierungsarchitektur von den Gefängnissen, Anstalten und Bordellen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts unterscheidet.

———— Der Abschnitt zu „Wissensordnungen" beginnt mit Luce Irigarays „Das Geschlecht, das nicht eins ist" (1977), einem kontrovers besprochenen Aufsatz, da die Autorin das weibliche Andere als solches widerlegen möchte, indem sie ein körperliches Merkmal (Vulva) heranzieht, um die „phallische Ordnung" (Bergermann, S. 411) anzugreifen. Passend zu körperlichen Merkmalen geht es weiter mit Friedrich Kittlers „Der Muttermund/Damenopfer" (1985), beides Kapitel aus seinem Buch *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/ 1900*, in denen Kittler Frauen als Diskursbedingung in der Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs aus technischem Fortschritt, Emanzipation und Degradierung betrachtet. Diesen Zusammenhängen geht auch Teresa de Lauretis in ihrem Aufsatz „Die Technologie

083

KATHRIN PETERS UND ANDREA SEIER, HG. (2016): GENDER & MEDIEN-READER.
ZÜRICH, DIAPHANES.

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

des Geschlechts" (1987) nach, in dem sie „Geschlecht als Effekt komplexer politischer und kultureller Diskurse und Praktiken" (Bergermann, 417) begreift – hier trifft sich Lauretis auch und besonders mit Mulvey. Der Abschnitt über „Wissensordnungen" schließt ab mit Anette Runtes „Zwischenstufen, Häufungskurven, Drehpunkt- und Pfadwegmodelle. Über moderne Topographien geschlechtlicher Devianz und ihre ‚trans-sexuelle' Normalisierung" (2001) – ein Essay, den Ulrike Bergermann als einen der ersten deutschsprachigen kulturwissenschaftlichen Texte zu Transsexualität überhaupt (vgl. Bergermann, 419) bezeichnet.

———— Im letzten Themenblock, dem Thema „Agency" gewidmet, lautet Karen Barads Ansage: „Real werden. Technowissenschaftliche Praktiken und die Materialisierung der Realität" (2007). Am Beispiel des piezoelektrischen Kristalls eines Ultraschallkopfes geht Barad der Frage nach, wie die „gegenseitige Konstitution von Objektes und Messprozessen innerhalb von Phänomenen" (Barad, 522) vor sich geht, die sie nicht als Inter-, sondern als „Intra-Aktion", als gegenseitige Durchdringung von wissenschaftlichem Gerät und Untersuchungsgegenstand, verstanden wissen will. Technowissenschaftliche Praktiken wie die Ultraschalluntersuchung eines Embryos sind demnach – und hier denkt Barad Butler weiter – performativ, Materie demnach „kein Ding, sondern ein Tun" (Barad, 533), das durch Agency in Kraft gesetzt wird. Rosalind Gill stellt in ihrem Text über „Postfeministische Medienkultur. Elemente einer Sensibilität" (2007) die Frage, was der Postfeminismus eigentlich ist, um den Begriff für „die Analyse gegenwärtiger kultureller Produkte und Texte" (Gill, 541) nutzbar zu machen. Sie plädiert dafür, Postfeminismus als „eine Sensibilität" (Gill, Ebd.) zu verstehen, die Bezug nimmt auf präfeministische und feministische Diskurse von Geschlecht und im Bewusstsein um diese Diskurse den Feminismus differenziert weiterdenkt. Jasbir K. Puar ruft mit dem Untertitel „Entwurf einer Geopolitik des Affekts und des Un-/Vermögens" „[d]ie Zeit der Prognose" (2009) aus, in der Identität „nicht als Wesenhaftigkeit, sondern als Risikokodierung begriffen werden kann" (Puar, 565). Puar spricht sich anhand eines Konzepts von „Konvivialität" für eine „umfassende Politik der Schwäche" (Puar, 567) aus, die es ermöglicht, sich jenseits von normierten Körpern miteinander „zu verlustieren [prima übersetzt! von Nanna Heidenreich], zu feiern [...], kurz: gemeinsam zu leben" (Puar, 571). Der letzte Text des Themenblocks stammt von Judith Butler und ist gleichzeitig der aktuellste Text des Bandes. In „Von der Performativität

084

KATHRIN PETERS UND ANDREA SEIER, HG. (2016): GENDER & MEDIEN-READER.
ZÜRICH, DIAPHANES.

FKW // ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
GESCHLECHTERFORSCHUNG
UND VISUELLE KULTUR
NR. 61 // FEBRUAR 2017

zur Prekarität" (2013) fragt die Philosophin unter Revision ihrer eigenen Theorien, ob sich Performativität und Prekarität wirklich sosehr voneinander unterscheiden, wie es auf den ersten Blick scheinen mag. Die Antwort liegt nahe und wird von Butler in einem kämpferischen Aufruf skandiert, der „neue Existenzweisen" erstreiten will, die Prekarität den Garaus machen.

WAS FÜR EINE REISE ——— Besonders hervorzuheben ist die Leistung der Übersetzer_innen der Texte des *Gender & Medien Readers*, die in zahlreichen Fußnoten den Prozess der Wortfindung von Original zu Übersetzung ausführen und so die Sprachbildung transparent machen. Dieses Handbuch ist ein großes, Kontroversen anstoßendes Glück. Möge es den Eingeweihten als unverzichtbares Nachschlagewerk dienen und den Neuankömmlingen den attraktiven Einstieg in die aufregenden Wechselbeziehungen von Gender Studies und Medienwissenschaft ermöglichen. Es bleibt zu wünschen, dass der *Gender & Medien Reader* den Beginn einer Reihe darstellt, die in zehn Jahren mit Teil 2 ihre Fortsetzung findet.

// **Angaben zur Autorin**

Melanie Letschnig, Filmwissenschaftlerin und Lehrende am Institut für Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft der Universität Wien, Forschungsschwerpunkte liegen auf Filmtheorie, Animationsfilm und Explosionen in höfischer Festkultur, Blumenstillleben und Kino (Dissertationsprojekt), Mitarbeiterin von Tricky Women Internationales Animationsfilmfestival, lebt und arbeitet in Wien. Publikationen: „Spektakuläre Ansichten. Interview mit Laura Mulvey" In: *an.schläge – Das feministische Magazin*, **VI/2016, S. 34-35; Katalogtext zu** *G_Girls (Ginnie & Gracie)* **von Susi Jirkuff für sixpackfilm http://www.sixpackfilm.com/de/catalogue/show/2312;**
„Hofburg, kurze Kleider und Knabenchor – Der Grand Prix de la Chanson 1967." In: Ehardt, Christine/Wagner, Florian/Vogt, Georg (Hrsg.): *Eurovision Song Contest. Eine kleine Geschichte zwischen Körper, Geschlecht und Nation*. **Wien 2015, S. 214-226.**

KATHRIN PETERS UND ANDREA SEIER, HG. (2016): GENDER & MEDIEN-READER. ZÜRICH, DIAPHANES.

KATHARINA SYKORA (2015): DIE TODE DER FOTOGRAFIE II. TOD, FOTOTHEORIE UND FOTOKUNST. PADERBORN, WILHELM FINK VERLAG

Mit dem lange angekündigten zweiten Band bringt die Braunschweiger Kunsthistorikerin Katharina Sykora ihr eine Dekade überspannendes Großprojekt zum Verhältnis von Tod und Fotografie nun selbst zu einem (vorläufigen?) Ende.

_____ Sie liefert damit eine detailreiche, stringent systematisierte und fein ausdifferenzierte Studie, in der sie auf insgesamt fast 1200 Seiten zahlreiche und zum Teil verblüffende Kreuzungspunkte zwischen Fotografie und Tod herausarbeitet. Sykoras Studie ist im Feld der Visual Culture Studies zu verorten. Verwendungsbereiche der Gebrauchsfotografie, soziale Praxen und Handlungsweisen, Fragen der Wahrnehmung sowie die Manifestation von Visuellem in schriftlichen Quellen rücken in den Fokus und bündeln sich in Sykoras Begriff des Fotografischen. Der auf Derridas Nachruf auf Roland Barthes rekurrierende Plural im Titel der Studie spielt auf ebendiese Multiperspektivität an und verbindet, wie Sykora in der Einleitung des ersten Bandes schreibt, kulturanthropologische, medientheoretische, ikonografische und ästhetische Überlegungen.

_____ An den Anfang ihrer Untersuchung stellt Sykora die sozialen Gebrauchsweisen von Porträt- und Totenfotografien im Kontext westlicher Bestattungs- und Erinnerungsriten. Ihnen ist der erste Band der Studie gewidmet. Als eine der frühen populären Nutzungsformen des neuen Mediums bilden sie nicht nur das chronologische Fundament, sondern auch den Ankerpunkt für zahlreiche fototheoretische und künstlerische Annäherungen, die Sykora nun im zweiten Band ausführlich untersucht. Die sich dabei ergebende Fülle an Material ordnet sie entlang wiederkehrender Motiv- und Denkfiguren, die sie in epochenübergreifenden Detailstudien näher beleuchtet.

_____ Eingangs widmet sich Sykora fototheoretischen Positionen, die eine strukturelle Analogie zwischen Tod und Fotografischem herstellen oder thanatologische Metaphern für das Fotografische entwickeln. Sie liefert allerdings keinen systematischen Überblick, sondern wählt Roland Barthes und Siegfried Kracauer als Hauptbezugspunkte, wurde deren Denken doch maßgeblich von der Betrachtung von Aufnahmen verstorbener Verwandter und somit dem sozialen Gebrauch der Fotografie angeregt. Anderen wichtigen Autoren wie Philippe Dubois oder Susan Sontag wird

86

hingegen vergleichsweise weniger Platz eingeräumt.[1] Insgesamt kristallisiert Sykora aus ihrer Lektüre drei theoretische Grundmodelle heraus: Das Mortifikationspotential der Fotografie, das sie mit dem Begriff des toten Spiegels umschreibt, die Denkfigur der Ablösung und schließlich in einer scheinbar paradoxen Umkehrung die der Belebung.

——— Sykora stellt die Wahrnehmung der Fotografie als mortifizierende Instanz in den Kontext des medialen Wettstreites zwischen Malerei und Fotografie im 19. Jahrhundert, und weist letztere in diesem Spannungsverhältnis als defizitär, da unbeseelt und unbelebt, aus. Als Beleg dienen ihr Zitate von Vertretern der Künste und Geisteswissenschaften wie Henri Laborde oder Friedrich Thiersch. Von hier aus schlägt sie einen Bogen zu Kracauer und Barthes, die beide die Entsemantisierung des Referenten im fotografischen Abbild beklagen, das sich als totes Ebenbild über das Reale legt. Referenzrahmen für diese Einordnung ist wohl die künstlerische Fotografie im zweiten Teil des Bandes, denn die Naturwissenschaft und Medizin bewerteten die Stillstellung des Lebens durch die Fotografie bereits damals durchaus positiv. Die fotografische Arretierung verhalf zu einer ungestörten Betrachtungssituation des Untersuchungsgegenstandes, die zuvor meist nur durch den realen, oder mit Barthes gesprochen, dem „großen" TOD – im Gegensatz zum „kleinen" Tod der Fotografie – möglich war. Im Folgenden erwies sich die Vorstellung des entsemantisierten Selbstabdruckes der Natur als mindestens genauso folgenreich und beherrscht als Denkfigur der Objektivität bis heute zahlreiche Diskurse der Fotografie.

——— Das dem fotografischen Akt zugeschriebenen Tötungspotential, das in zahlreiche umgangssprachliche Formulierungen wie „Ein Foto schießen" Eingang gefunden hat, untersucht Sykora in einem weiteren Kapitel. Hier erweist sich ihr kulturhistorischer Ansatz als besonders fruchtbar. Sie zeichnet nach, wie das Aufkommen dieser Rhetorik mit der Entwicklung der Momentaufnahme zu Beginn der 1880er Jahre in Verbindung steht. Der sprachlichen Analogie ging demnach eine technische voraus, so wurden zahlreiche Kameramodelle entwickelt, die nach dem Prinzip des Trommelrevolvers konzipiert waren. Mit den kurzen Belichtungszeiten und handlicheren Kameraformaten veränderte sich zudem auch der Akt des Fotografierens, die fotogenen Motive mussten im Fluss der Wirklichkeit aktiv gesucht und „gestellt" werden. Wurde dazu um die Jahrhundertwende noch die koloniale und aristokratische Metaphorik der Jagd genutzt, traten spätestens mit dem Ersten Weltkrieg

87

(und der Popularisierung der Kamera) militärsprachliche Analogien in den Vordergrund, wie Sykora mit zahlreichen Zitaten aus der Werbung und Kameramagazinen überzeugend darlegt. Interessant ist auch ein Werbetext von Rolleiflex, den sie zitiert: „Immer ist der Mann mit der Kamera der Angreifer, der den Krieg vom Zaun bricht" (31). Deutlich wird hier, wie in den Akt des Fotografierens ein Geschlechterverhältnis eingeschrieben ist. Krieg und Jagd als Domänen, in denen die Männer ihre Männlichkeit unter Beweis stellen konnten, wurden in der modernen Industriegesellschaft auf die Fotografie verlagert. Gleichzeitig drückt sich darin eine geschlechtlich codierte (Blick)macht aus, die Sykora im nächsten, der Denkfigur der Ablösung gewidmeten, Abschnitt weiter verfolgt. Hier versammelt sie Fototheorien, die den raumzeitlichen Abstand zwischen Bild und Referent und Foto und Betrachter_in thematisieren. Ausführlich legt sie dar, wie die auf antiken Vorbildern beruhenden *eidola*- und Optogrammvorstellungen des 19. Jahrhunderts, die im fotografischen Prozess eine schichtenweise Abschälung des Referenten sehen, deren Häute sich im menschlichen wie technischen Auge ablagern, in moderne und zeitgenössische Fototheorien migrierten. Barthes entwickelte daraus seine Vorstellung des von sich selbst abgezogenen, gespaltenen Subjektes, das sich im Moment des Fotografierens bereits selber zu einem toten Bild macht. Kracauer nutzte sie für eine Kritik an den modernen Massenmedien: In ihrem Realitätshunger „fresse" die Fotografie quasi die Wirklichkeit auf und ersticke sie zugleich mit der Fülle ihrer Abzüge, die uns etwa in den Illustrierten begegnen. Den zweiten Teil des Abschnittes widmet Sykora einer vielschichtigen und lesenswerten Auseinandersetzung mit dem Mythos der Medusa, der in zahlreiche Fototheorien Eingang gefunden hat und dessen unterschiedliche Bedeutungsstränge sie heraus arbeitet. So vergleicht sie den Blick der Medusa mit dem Blick der Kamera, die alles erstarren lassen. Im Ringen des Perseus und der Medusa sieht sie den (geschlechtlich codierten) Kampf um das Sehen und Angesehen werden, Subjekt- und Objektstatus des Blickverhältnisses. In den Fototheorien des 20. Jahrhunderts figuriert die meduseische Metapher hingegen – wie sie zeigt – vor allem als erstarrende (Schock-)Wirkung von Fotos, die eine gewalttätige Wirklichkeit zeigen, aber auch als ein Mittel zu deren Überwindung: Wie in der Spiegelung im Schild des Perseus lässt sich mittels des fotografischen „Spiegels" eine tödliche Gefahr betrachten, ohne selbst getötet zu werden.

_____ Die thanatologische Qualität der Fotografie birgt jedoch eine dialektische Struktur: als dritte wichtige Denkfigur im Verhältnis

von Tod und Fotografie identifiziert Sykora die Vivifikation, der sie in zwei Richtungen nachgeht: der „Beseelung" des toten Mediums Fotografie durch eine Verkunstung, die den subjektiven Anteil der Fotografen und Fotografinnen am fotografischen Akt hervorkehrt und der Verlebendigung des Abgebildeten im Prozess der Wahrnehmung durch die Betrachter. Letzteres exemplifiziert sie auf vielschichtige Weise anhand Barthes Buch *Die helle Kammer*, das im Kontext seiner Trauer um die verstorbene Mutter und als literarisch-theoretisches Denkmal, in dem sie wiederaufersteht als „lebendes Bild' in der Schrift" (84), im Jahr seines eigenen Todes entstand. Besonders spannend an Sykoras Lektüre ist, wie sie in seinem Text dem Prinzip des Fotografischen und darin enthaltenen geschlechtsspezifischen Zuschreibungen nachspürt. So konzipiert Barthes die Fotografie und die Mutter als Metonymie apparativer und biologischer Reproduktion, beide bringen Bilder hervor. Im Moment der Geburt töten sie jedoch auch das Hervorgebrachte bzw. verurteilen es zum Sterben. „Wie die Mutter existiert die Fotografie zwischen Leben und Tod, der Vergangenheit und der Zukunft, [...] Körper und Bild, Subjekt und Imago" (85). Barthes Buch und Denken erwiesen sich selbst als äußerst (re)produktiv und veranlassten wiederum befreundete Denker wie Italo Calvino oder Jaques Derrida, nach seinem Tod über die Möglichkeiten der erinnernden Wiederbelebung des Verstorbenen zu reflektieren.

_____ Der zweite, rund drei Viertel des gesamten Buches ausmachende Teil setzt sich schließlich mit den künstlerischen Strategien auseinander, die existentielle Tatsache des Todes zu thematisieren, aber auch zu transzendieren. Ähnlich wie im Theorieteil erarbeitet Sykora thematische Gruppen, innerhalb derer sie eine Vielzahl unterschiedlicher künstlerischer Einzelpositionen von der Frühzeit der Fotografie bis in die Gegenwart verhandelt. Die Gruppenbildung orientiert sich dabei an den zentralen Parametern der Begegnungsmöglichkeiten mit dem Tod: der eigene Tod, der Tod der Anderen und der Ort des Todes. Spannend wird es vor allem da, wo Sykora die Grenzen der rein ästhetischen Fragestellungen verlässt und auch hier nach den sozio-politischen und kulturellen Agenden künstlerischer Todesbilder fragt. Dies führt sie beispielsweise zu den vielen Leben der angeblichen Totenmaske einer ertrunkenen Unbekannten aus der Seine. Anhand zahlreicher Beispiele zeigt sie, wie deren Bildnis immer wieder zum zentralen Referenzpunkt von Totenfotografiebüchern, Romanen und fotokünstlerischen Arbeiten vor allem der Zwischenkriegszeit wurde. Diese nachhaltige Faszination an der Totenmaske interpretiert Sykora als eine Transzendierung des im

89

Ersten Weltkrieg massenhaft erlebten gewaltsamen Todes. So verspricht das Lächeln auf den Lippen der jungen Frau einen schönen Tod und ewiges Leben. In den Beschreibungen des Betörenden und Verlockenden wird dem Tod wortwörtlich ein attraktives Gesicht verliehen. Allerdings spiegeln sich darin vor allem auch tradierte Geschlechterstereotypen, etwa das der Frau als tödliche Verführerin. Die Totenmaske der Unbekannten wird so zur Projektionsfläche eines ganzen Kollektivs, die allerdings nicht nur hilft den gewaltsamen Kriegstod, sondern auch die destabilisierte Geschlechterordnung mittels eines reaktionären Frauenbildes zu bewältigen.

———— Gerade Sykoras Beispiele der Selbstinszenierung von Künstlern als Tote zeigen deutlich, dass auch das Bild einer fingierten Selbsttötung keineswegs ein rein ästhetisches Statement ist, sondern ein bewusster Akt der Selbstpositionierung, der Versuch der aktiven Einschreibung in Diskurse, an denen man teilzuhaben begehrt. Dies gilt für Fred Holland Days fotografische Selbstinszenierungen als gekreuzigter Christus, die ihm Anerkennung einer von der Malerei geprägten Hochkultur verschaffen sollten, ebenso wie für Hippolyte Bayard, der sich in der Geschichte der Erfindung der Fotografie seinen Platz zurückerobern wollte. Auch Jean Cocteau entwarf sein Selbstporträt als Toter als eine Art Testament des eigenen (unverstandenen) künstlerischen Erbes für eine imaginäre Zukunft. Erst durch den eigenen vorweggenommen, zuweilen als Künstlermord kontextualisierten, Tod soll das eigene intellektuelle Überleben gesichert werden.

———— Um gesellschaftliche Anerkennung einer marginalisierten Gruppe geht es auch in den Kapiteln zu den Vertreter_innen einer alternativen Kunstszene im New Yorker East Village der 1980er Jahre. David Wojnarowicz, Mark Morrisroe oder Nan Goldin hielten einem gedoppelten sozialen und realen Verschwinden ihres Freundeskreises – durch eine reaktionäre Kunstpolitik einerseits und die Auswirkungen von AIDS andererseits – gezielt Bilder eines diversifizierten Leben, Sterbens und Gedenkens entgegen.

———— Viele der untersuchten künstlerischen Projekte sind in Form eines Buches erschienen. Dies steht, wie Sykora am Beispiel von Nan Goldins Portfolio für ihre Freundin Cookie Mueller feststellt, einerseits in der Tradition des Trauertagebuches. Andererseits verspricht die Reproduzierbarkeit und multiplikatorischen Verbreitungsmöglichkeit dieses Mediums aber auch eine bestmögliche Wiederbelebung der Verstorbenen (dies ahnte wohl schon Roland Barthes als er seiner Mutter ein Denkmal in Form eines Buches setzte), genauso wie die Bilder der Freund_innen als

Material der eigenen künstlerischen Arbeit verfügbar und lebendig gehalten werden.

_____ So wie Sykora Metaphern des Fotografischen in theoretischen Texten nachspürt, arbeitet sie auch die Artikulation fototheoretischer Formulierungen in den künstlerischen Arbeiten heraus. Sie widmet sich damit einem Aspekt der Fotografieforschung, der erst seit kurzem größeres Interesse erfährt.[2] Hippolyte Bayards Selbstporträts als Ertrunkener und Duane Michals und Jochen Gerz' Fotoarbeiten sind da nur einige wenige Beispiele, denen sie sich ausführlich widmet.

_____ In einer letzten Bewegung thematisiert Sykora schließlich anhand eines Fotos von Schaulustigen eines Mordes des New Yorker Fotografen Weegee die großen Unsichtbaren im Diskurs um Tod und Fotografie: die Betrachter_innen. In dieser Aufnahme offenbart sich für sie die gespaltene Betrachter_innenposition von Totenbildern: in der Abwendung des Blicks weg vom Toten hin auf die Betrachter_innen, wird uns gewahr, dass wir uns nun selber in der Position der Betrachteten, also des oder der Toten, befinden: Barthes, „Ich werde gewesen sein".

_____ Zuvor sei jedoch noch ein letzter Wunsch erlaubt: der auf Fortsetzung. So bleibt in Sykoras äußerst lesenswerter und inspirierender Studie neben den sozialen Gebrauchsweisen der Totenfotografie und der künstlerischen Fotografie ein nicht minder wichtiger Teil ausgeklammert: Aufnahmen des Fotojournalismus und der Gebrauch fotografischer Bilder von Toten aus gewalttätigen und kriegerischen Konflikten in den modernen Massenmedien. Nicht nur harrt hier ein ungemein reicher Bilderfundus seiner Analyse, auch theoretische Auseinandersetzungen, etwa die Aktualisierung der Medusenmetapher durch Linda Hentschel und Otto Karl Werckmeister ergäben ohne Zweifel eine weitere spannende Lektüre.

// Angaben zur Autorin
Maria Schindelegger, Studium der Kunstgeschichte, Philosophie und Amerikanistik in Wien, München und Hamburg. 2015 Promotion mit einer Arbeit über die Kriegsfotografien von Margaret Bourke-White. Lehrbeauftragte am Institut für Kunstgeschichte/ LMU München. Forschungsschwerpunkt im Bereich Fotografie und Visualisierung von Krieg und Gewalt. Aktuell Forschungsprojekt zu den visuellen Kulturen der befreiten Konzentrationslager.

91