

Floating Images – Enigmatic Narratives

Recent Videos by Hubbard / Birchler

Konrad Bitterli

Curator, Kunstmuseum, Kunstverein St. Gallen

In a seemingly endless stream of pictures the camera paces off a dimly lit tin hut and registers all the things that have accumulated there: machines, tools, scattered beer bottles, a sofa, and somewhere in between a set of drums and several guitars. This sequence, with its soundtrack of chirping crickets, comes to an abrupt end inside the room and then slowly, steadily moves backwards to its starting point in the darkness of the outside wall. But the movement does not stop there; it glides without interruption out into the night, where a young woman comes into view in front of the illuminated window. The camera captures her in the process of picking up stones and throwing them at a deserted house. The panes of a window are heard shattering in the background and a dog begins to bark. The camera pans back to the inside of the shed, where four young men have assembled to make music. One of them is playing a bass guitar while the other three listen to him or talk to each other. The scene is filmed with the same quiet movement as before. Then the camera takes us through the dark zone of the wall and behind the house. The young woman has vanished; only the chirping and the soft strumming of the guitar are heard. These movements are repeated until the camera finally pans outside to the window through which the young people inside are clearly outlined. On crossing the borderline between inside and outside once again, the video loop starts pacing off the shed again.

The Swiss-American artist duo Teresa Hubbard (born in 1965 in Dublin/Ireland) and Alexander Birchler (born in 1962 in Baden/Switzerland) call their latest video piece DETACHED BUILDING. It is designed as an ongoing loop and executed as an image floating in the darkened gallery. One is struck by the extremely gentle movement of the camera, pacing off the workshop. All of the unassuming events and objects are captured in large-format and contribute to the compressed atmosphere of the five-minute sequence. The soundtrack – inside, the chirping of the crickets; outside, the sound of the guitar – underscores the formal and contextual framing of the

interior and exterior spaces. The concentrated atmosphere of the work distinguishes it from the masses of music videos produced with conventional MTV aesthetics. While the latter attempt to tell often trivial stories in the space of a few minutes by means of compressed sequencing and fast cuts, Hubbard / Birchler's video loop suggests various narrative strands. Although the musicians and the woman do not appear to be related to each other in any way, a subtext of dichotomies, such as inside / outside, light / dark, man / woman, or individual / group, hints at potential narratives. These do not consolidate into a story but instead provoke unanswered questions: What is the relationship among the musicians and between them and the woman? Why is she throwing stones? Is the guitarist playing for fun or is he being tested? Whatever the case, a touch of gentle melancholy always resonates in Hubbard / Birchler's works. Emotionally charged experiences and existential conflict seem about to ruffle the familiarity of surface appearances. *It always comes down to telling a story. For us, constructing a narrative most often involves the process of physically building a space. We build spaces that suggest psychological tension, where there is a slippage between inside and outside, past and present.*¹

Hubbard / Birchler's largest exhibition to date, "Wild Walls", began at the Museum Haus Lange und Haus Esters in Krefeld before moving on to the Amsterdam Center of Photography, the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, and the Kunsthalle zu Kiel. It was the first exhibition to highlight their current video work, following numerous exhibitions in Zürich, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Chicago, and also at the biennials in Venice and Montreal, where their photo works reached a wide audience. The title of the current presentation, "Wild Walls", refers explicitly to the cinema and the world of movie theaters. Filmmaking had already played a role in the artists' early works, starting with the reconstruction of models in the installation CONTESTANTS IN A BIRDBHOUSE COMPETITION (1991), in the impressive photo series *Stripping* (1998), for which the duo built their own stage sets to study the transition between indoor and outdoor spaces, and more recently in the so-called *Filmstills* (200), which belie expectations by depicting the façades of movie houses instead of scenes from films.

¹ Alexander Birchler in conversation with Martin Hentschel in: Martin Hentschel (ed.), *Wide Walls* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2001), p. 77.

The history of films and specifically one of its most renowned directors, Alfred Hitchcock, are central to an understanding of Hubbard / Birchler's videos. For once the subject of investigation is not the irresistibly charming Kim Novak, who captivates the audience in *Vertigo*; it is the corpse hidden in a chest in the film *Rope*. During the cocktail party in the film, the hors'd'oeuvres are served on the very chest in which the corpse is hidden. *Rope* contains all the ingredients that made Hitchcock famous, but it stands out from the great director's other films because of an experimental approach which was to make it a masterpiece of cinema. It was shot in ten-minute long takes. In order to shoot a scene that would need no editing, so-called "wild walls" were constructed. These movable flats were simply shifted around during the take in order to enable the camera to track the protagonists through several rooms. Through this trick of staging, Hitchcock shifts the attention from the plot of the film – the study of a supposedly perfect murder – to the film's ordinarily hidden processes of production. Thus, despite the obvious effort to sustain a narrative fiction, the master of suspense actually lays the groundwork for the treatment of film as constructed reality. A comparable but, in this case, intentional revelation of cinematic illusion also marks Hubbard / Birchler's video works *DETACHED BUILDING* and *EIGHT* (both 2001). On the face of it, they show ordinary, familiar things, while actually undermining film conventions and linear narration with great determination.

In *EIGHT*, the two strategies seem even more pointed, and the psychological aspects more condensed. The title refers to a girl's birthday garden party which has literally ended up all wet. Only the colorful decorations of a cheerful children's party and a deserted buffet have been left behind. Into this scene, staged in great detail, walks a girl, who cuts herself a piece of cake and goes back into the house, steadily followed by the camera. Once again the tracking camera links interior and exterior space in a single sequence. The take is interrupted only by the occasional close-up and two reverses: one shows the face of the girl outdoors, while the other captures her looking at the garden through the "weeping window".² In contrast to *DETACHED BUILDING*, the geography of this scene remains puzzling although it is united through the tracking camera. Inside and outside spaces are complex and convoluted, the unity of place and action is called into question. The spatial continuum

² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

suggested in the film proves to be sustainable only as a mental construct, as a fragile fiction. The fragility of the illusion is underscored by the endless repetition of the three-minute sequence which undermines any conventional understanding of time passing. Linear time becomes cyclical; there is no before, no after, and no causality.

In *DETACHED BUILDING* and *EIGHT*, Hubbard/Birchler thwart the “semblance of truthfulness”,³ characteristic of classical cinema and mass culture, with their smooth surfaces, linear narratives, and persistent concealment of the process of production. Art practitioners today frequently seek to subvert the conventions of fictionalisation. A widespread method in contemporary video art, for example, is to split up linear narrative modes in multiple projections, a method practiced with great mastery by such artists as Pipilotti Rist or Doug Aitken. In contrast, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler do not split up perception in their work, but rather rely on the suggestive power of the slowly tracking camera and endless video loops in impressive large-scale projections. But they also interrogate constructions of reality by constantly undermining the premises of narrative film, the illusion of causal connections, temporal sequences or spatial unities by means of time cycles and rooms within rooms. Their memorable images recount ordinary tales of spatial and psychological constraints, of vulnerability, of mourning and loss, stories from familiar, daily lives, arrested in enigmatic subjunctives whose poignancy rests on the very fact that they are entirely open-ended – as floating, non-linear narratives with the viewer as a participant in the never-ending process of devising potential meanings.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

³ Vilém Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1994), p. 120.