At the Limits of Photography

Cinematic Elements in the Work of Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler

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Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's working methods are hardly different to those of a film director and not just since they have been making short films with professional actors. In their photographic mise-en-scenes and even before that in their early sculptural and performative works, this particular mode of production has been leitmotif and red thread in one. Their work operates within a cinematic context that has had a fundamental effect on art production as a whole over the last ten years.[1] The reasons for the present appeal of cinema are many and diverse. In general terms it may be said that certain aspects of the entertainment industry are deployed by artists not least as a response to the ever greater importance of the mass media. Commercial cinema is perceived as the place where illusions and glossy images are produced, since its films by definition tell fictitious narratives. Contemporary art production makes use of these same affirmative strategies and courts the viewer's favor with its own aesthetic of seduction. For a large numbers of artists the cinema is an inexhaustible reservoir whose existing images can be manipulated, restructured and deconstructed. Hubbard / Birchler, on the other hand, have appropriated a 'cinematic grammar', that is to say they have adopted specific film techniques with which they arrive at independent pictorial solutions that go beyond precise, identifiable quotation. However, the cinematic dimension of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander

Birchler's work does not merely consist of film-related production methods. Another specifically cinematic element in their work is the sensual effect of their large-format photographs that confront the viewer with life-sized figures, thereby concealing their own mediality so that the photographic mode itself will be forgotten. A similar process may also be seen in film which only seems credible or plausible to viewers when they lose sight of its mediality. But above all the work of Hubbard / Birchler is distinguished by its narrative dimension. Using elaborate props and 'film sets' they stage voids with multiple levels of meaning that specifically convey a cinematic temporality which in turn suggests a possible story without beginning and without end. Thus Hubbard / Birchler generate a narrative dimension from the conditions of the medium of photography, which in turn means that their relationship to photography is wholly different to that of postmodern attempts to denounce the medium with the intention of revealing it as an ideological construct. On the contrary, they have found a way to make playful, productive use of its very deficiencies.

Looking back, Hubbard / Birchler's central interest in the issues involved in staging images and in theatricality is readily apparent: starting with the series *Falling Down*, 1996, and leading to the tableau photographs. Hindsight shows, too, that in their own way the earlier performative and sculptural works were also drawing on cinematic strategies.

Paths to Photofiction

Performance and Self-Substantiation

When they first started to collaborate ten years ago, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler worked in performance, often focusing on their

own collaborative work-mode as an artist-couple. Besides unpublished actions they also made a number of black-and-white photographs that were intended as more than mere documentations of performances. Despite their modest, small formats these photographs stand in their own right as autonomous works. In the wider context of art the boundaries between documentation and independent mise-en-scenes have been relatively fluid since as long ago as the mid-1960s, for in many performances it seemed that cause and effect were reversed in the sense that the need for documentation was the incentive for the action. Ten years later any pose in front of the camera lens was enough to produce a staged photograph.[2] Perhaps the best known example of the 'one-ness' of performance, staged scenario and autonomous work are Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, which Arthur C. Danto views as unique for the way that they are simultaneously and inseparably both photographs *and* performances.[3] In Hubbard / Birchler's work a similar formulation in terms of the aesthetic of forms, but which is also primarily concerned with the artists' thoughts of 'self-substantiation' may be seen in *Horse*, 1992. This photograph, which was intended as part of an unrealized series, examines the interdependency of the partners in a relationship and turns a documented event into a staged moment. Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler in fact appear in front of the camera in a horse costume. Paper ears, a brush, a bucket and a cloth that is too short are not, however, that convincing. And the flex of the self-release shutter points only too clearly to the modus operandi. This is laid bare in order to take apart the 'one-ness' of artistic production which is usually reflected in the lonely, romanticized artist-subject. At the same time *Horse* is also an allegory of the ideal symbiosis, since a horse always has four legs, i.e. both parts of the team are indispensable,

even if only one can be the head. The new joint artist-body as portrayed by Hubbard / Birchler is, however, extremely ambivalent: the horse is too reminiscent of the slapstick turns familiar from circus acts in which the clumsily uncoordinated movements of the actors in costume invariably induce laughter.

Noah's Ark, also made in 1992, constitutes a three-part, black-and-white photo work which takes as its subject the artistic work process the couple are involved in together. The previously homogenous artist-body has now been divided into two museum attendants in white coats. Reading the narrative sequence from left to right *(Unpacking, Lunchbreak, Working)* the artists set up a diorama against a painted background that goes back to Edward Hicks' painting *Noah's Ark*, 1846. Their initial shared astonishment at the task facing them is followed by an uncommunicative lunch-break. Later they start work again, in a concentrated manner, but separately and each dealing with a different area. In the foreground there are stuffed animals, placed there in readiness for the procession into Noah's Ark. It becomes clear that Hubbard / Birchler are responsible for selecting the animals, that is to say they are acting as creators but are also part of the creation story because they are the only human couple in sight. The painting in the background is not finished, nor has the ideal arrangement been found for the animals; there is still work to be done before the artist duo can also climb up into Noah's Ark. The persuasive illusionism of dioramas, where it is impossible to distinguish between painted and real animals, here represents a line of argument familiar to us from natural history, with an individual story of joint-authorship embedded in the widely known biblical myth of Noah. But *Noah's Ark* is less a critique of the prevalent conventions of scientific representation than it

is a pointer to their fictionality and to the 'constructed' nature of such pictures. The fact that the diorama plays such a central part in Hubbard / Birchler's subsequent sculptural works is due in the first instance to its capacity to create illusions. In addition to this the diorama, as a proto-cinematic phenomenon, occupied a prominent place in early 19th-century entertainment. The connection between diorama and cinema is both historical and structural: the motifs portrayed in dioramas were predominantly interiors of churches or sentimental Alpine scenes, as though opening up new vistas on the world.[4] Railroads had come into being not long before so the diorama appeared at just the right time to offer an alternative to expensive, exhausting travel. The perfect deception of the senses gave the viewer the impression of temporarily being somewhere else, exactly as the cinema was to do later on.[5] The topicality of early mass media in contemporary art production is seen in exemplary form in Hiroshi Sugimoto's three conceptual series *Dioramas, Wax Museums* and *Theatres*, which he has been constantly extending since 1976. Sugimoto uses didactic, geo-historical dioramas to examine the difference between illusionistic artificiality and the reality content of representational images, which he feels have lost some of their credibility through the impact of film and television. He attempts to deflect this loss by photographing them. This in fact means that the principle of photography is applied twice over, for the prepared animals have as it were already been photographed in the sense that their individual poses seem as frozen and rigid as though they had already been captured on film. In contrast to Sugimoto, who seeks to release the rigor mortis of the animals, thereby achieving a surreal snap-shot effect,[6] Hubbard / Birchler are interested in the specific

illusionism of the diorama, further exploring its medial conditions and construction methods in their sculptural works.

'Simulative' Sculpture and Casts

While Hubbard / Birchler's performative work drew them to photography from the outset, which they then used as a documentary tool for their self-stagings, the relationship of their 'simulative' sculptures to the medium of photography is initially indirect. Like *Noah's Ark*, the installation *On Loan from the Museum in Us*, 1993, also contains stuffed animals, this time positioned around life-sized body sculptures of the artists in two museum show-cases. The simulative quality of the two casts, as imprints of the artists' own bodies, has more than a metaphorical relationship to photography for - like the latter - it first exists as a negative form which is then transformed into a positive. The cast depends on a momentary temporality in keeping with Barthes' *"That-has-been"* and therefore is, like photography, inscribed with an affinity to death. The most striking examples of this are death masks, and so it is in *On Loan from the Museum in Us*, that the process of decay has already taken hold of the bodies. Hubbard / Birchler's sculptural work thus also conforms to the medialconditions of photography, so that one might perhaps refer to it in terms of Georges Didi-Huberman's "three-dimensional photography".[7] Didi-Huberman specifically relates Duchamp's last major work *Etant Donnés*, 1946-66, to the principles of photography, thereby providing a framework for our understanding of Hubbard / Birchler's similar procedure, whereby they use the means of sculpture to imitate and hence to anticipate a photograph. In *The First and the Last*, 1993 - a show-case set into a wall in which we see a man's hand protruding from a white, ironed shirt-sleeve twisting around a woman's

ankle - for the first time there is a clearly formulated viewer's standpoint, which is itself without the voyeuristic implications of *Etant Donnés*. This has the effect of creating something like a photographic camera view which by definition only offers one frame, one particular angle, with the result that the temporality that is intrinsic to sculptural 'seeing' falls by the wayside. From this point onwards it was only needed a small step for Hubbard / Birchler to in fact transpose sculpture into the medium of photography.

In *Shortcut*, 1993 – an allegory of artistic production and the traces it may leave - an artificially recreated shortcut was theatrically lit in blue and yellow and then photographed. For the artists the limitation to one view was crucial to their move into photography, for as a medium it is not only able to isolate moments in time, but it can also make individual views plausible. In contrast to photography, sculpture does not legitimate the view, or only ever treats it as a mere fragment of a whole which is never visible as such. The transition from sculpture to photography in Hubbard / Birchler's work does not, however, mark a caesura in their output, for photofiction, which has played a part in artistic production for a good twenty years now, emerged specifically against the backdrop of a reality that is now only ever perceived through the filter of the media, and occupies the same place as 'simulative' sculptures. These have been described as simulative because they are closely related to systems of signs that do not point to what is absent but want to be that thing themselves. They duplicate reality instead of imitating it, like the wax figures at Madame Tussaud's or, of course, like dioramas.[8] Hubbard / Birchler's artificial recreations generate just this kind of an independent reality and seem, like simulation, to involve a substitution of the real with signs of the

real.[9] However, unlike hyper-realistic sculptures they do not simply seek to achieve a trompe I'oeil effect, which in turn means that the term simulative should only be understood as referring to a directional tendency in their work. In Hubbard / Birchler's work simulation is never a threat to reality - whatever form that reality may take - but rather a fictive counter-model, which does indeed present itself as a self- contained cosmos, although only on the basis that it will always be distinguishable from reality. Thus, in the photofictions from *Falling Down*, 1996, onwards, the term 'simulation' can only be used to a very limited extent, since the specific self-reflection of these works always displays a pictoriality that wards off any danger of their falling prey to iconoclasm by being perfect, illusionistic deceptions.[10] Thus in their work Hubbard / Birchler perform a highly charged balancing act between simulation and post-modern exposure of the means of representation (as fake), which is ultimately designed to draw one's attention exclusively to the ways the constructed image is made.

Modes of Narrative Construction

"Falling down" can refer as much to objects falling to the ground as to the (mental) loss of bodily control. In eight variations, Hubbard / Birchler show a more or less clearly defined gender-specific sequence of images of falling objects. The stylization of the frozen moment points to the now mythical (albeit real) capacity of photography to capture the so-called decisive split-second. *Falling Down*, 1996, monumentalizes precisely this moment in the passing gesture. The falling bank-notes, shoes and so on stand out from the background by virtue of their different degree of 'reality', yet are connected intimately with that same background on a causal level and offer the viewer a moment of narrative. In the history of film, hazily-lit rear projections

are associated above all with Hitchcock. In his later films (e.g. The Birds, 1963, and Mamie, 1964) he used this method for car journeys, at a time when it had long since fallen into disfavor because it turned out too pale for color films. By deploying an in fact inadequate form of illusion Hitchcock could create an effect somewhere between reality and fiction: "Hitchcock took full advantage of the modernist art form, exploiting its potential for story telling but simultaneously, like any good modernist, disclosing how the tricks were accomplished."[11] The use of rear projection as a means of creating illusory space in *Falling Down* is unsettling and generates a specific, artificial appearance. As in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Hubbard / Birchler thus link a certain plausibility in the illusion with a self-reflexive level, with the former having generated the latter in the first place.

Beyond this it is impossible to decide whether the objects have been intentionally dropped or whether the hope is that they will be caught before they hit the ground. The ambiguity and the indefinite quality of this moment in time is due to the fact that Hubbard / Birchler have painstakingly reconstructed a single incident: the objects were first hung up on threads in the foreground and suitably arranged; the next stage involved finding the right gesture for the supposed fall. This reconstruction takes photography as a medium ad absurdum, for as Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler have themselves said: "We wanted to find outhow a moment can capture the camera."[12] The focus of these works is not only the capacity of photography to isolate moments from a continuum of action and to recreate the view determined by the photographic equipment, for within these photofictions all the characteristics of this medium are questioned. The fact that the images are staged robs photography of its much-vaunted

objective mode of representation, and the contingency of a photograph, which hitherto always corresponded to the disarray of visible reality, is now set against a carefully conceived and composed pictorial arrangement. The referential relationship between visible reality and photography is cast aside and for the first time, as in film or in painting, images are created that have their origins in the human imagination. Yet Hubbard / Birchler's works are scarcely concerned with painterly and compositional aspects. Their motifs and their pictorial arrangements are more reminiscent of single frames from a film which is itself made up of an accumulation of photographs. Nevertheless *Falling Down* does not evoke a specific film or a particular genre, but speaks a language that is familiar to us from the cinema and which is itself without forerunners or role-models.

The mildly unsettling quality of the fiction in *Falling Down* serves to underpin the construction methods of the images and hence their narrative content. The viewer's gaze is directed towards the individual narrative moments, separated from each other, with the result that the narration falls apart into distinct sections. At the same time, however, Falling Down offers the viewer a plausible story, as long as the viewer sets the ball rolling. This requires a productive input on the part of the viewer, since he/she is caught up in the interpretative equivalent of free fall. All the objects tell stories that have been started but which are as yet unfinished. The things that the viewer may attach meaning to slip as inevitably from his/her grasp as do cup and saucer, shoes and bank-notes from the actors' hands.[13] Hubbard / Birchler's deconstruction of the tools of narration thus comes close to an allegory of interpretation concerned with exploring the genesis of meaning.

Selectivity and the Power of Suggestion

Perhaps it is due to the continuous dialog between Hubbard / Birchler as an artist-couple that their work and particularly their photographic series follows a very clear line of argument. The five tableaux Holes, 1997, not only use rear projection but systematically explore innately photographic questions regarding the medium and its limits. The earlier question as to how a narrative may be constituted is followed by the question as to the laws laid down by the photographic apparatus. A voyeuristic glimpse through a dark, vague foreground which clearly has echoes of Duchamp's Etant Donnes, reveals a female or male hand, in sharp focus, belonging to a headless figure. In contrast to *Falling Down* here Hubbard / Birchler are not taking apart the individual components of the narrative but in a sense it is the viewer's expectations that are being played with. The view from out of a wardrobe, or through a broken picture, of the waiting, contempla-tive hands is extremely evocative, particularly since gestures can so readily give a seismographic reading of even the most minimal psychic changes. In this fragmentary depiction the pictures explore the photo-graphic approach to an object whereby the camera evaluates meanings and creates hierarchies of presence.[14] An unexplained situation is presented as though it were of the greatest of importance. Another level of reflection in *Holes* is embodied in the holes themselves which replicate the circumstance of the photographic camera, namely the progression from out of darkness to elsewhere. The sharply defined hole thus represents the camera's way of seeing, as it were subjecting the viewer's gaze to the pull of a zoom lens. The hands in focus and the blurred foreground, for their part, correspond to the three-dimensional structure of the photographic device itself,

which only understands spatial illusions as a series of different focal distances.

In *Holes*, as in *Falling Down*, Hubbard / Birchler wanted to show that even from just a few elements or from an extremely fragmented mode of seeing it is possible, due to the imaginative input on the part of the viewer, for a narrative dimension to emerge that goes beyond arbitrary and freely associative projections. The power of suggestion of the very selectivity of these images thus demonstrates a quality that is intrinsic to photography (and to every camera), that is to say the capacity to create meaning and to conjure up things absent and invisible from the sparsest of narrative elements. Hubbard / Birchler make use of this potential albeit without concerning themselves with whether the photograph is lying or not.

Photographic Simultaneity and Filmic Sequences

What exactly are the five women in the series *Stripping*, 1998, doing? Could one describe them as having come to a contemplative standstill? Are their facial expressions betraying for a split second emotions that are otherwise hidden deep inside? Or has the viewer just stumbled in on the rehearsals too early, at the stage when the actresses have not yet finally taken up their poses and the presence of the technicians is still tangible?'[15]

The title of this series of large-format photographs is a pun on the verb 'to strip', which can of course range from the act of undressing, to clearing out a room, to removing layers of paint, to taking away a cover or a screen like, for instance, the front wall of a film-set. With

scrupulous care Hubbard / Birchler patiently constructed a fictive room to create a location for a sequence of actions that may possibly be connected to the (emotional) stripping-down of a figure. The blatant disclosure of these structures as illusions in the spirit of Brechtian alienation may well recall Jeff Wall's first light box. *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, which was constructed expressly for the display window of a gallery in Vancouver. The destroyed room, belonging to a woman, with its overtones of sexual violence and implicit allusion to a monumental painting by Delacroix similarly does not attempt to conceal its set-like construction; on the contrary. In *Stripping*, on the other hand, the deconstruction of fictional architectural structures is not a primary issue, rather it is a means to an end. The very distinct directional gaze of the figures, from inside to outside - be it out of the window or into the viewer's space and the pupils semi-obscured by the dark line on the prints points to Hubbard / Birchler's central interest in the gaze itself. Their question as to the viewer's gaze and that of the camera should not, however, be mistaken for a critique of voyeurism and hence of the interaction of gaze and desire. It is much more the narrative perspective, the so-called 'point of view', which - as a 'mechanical' gaze - evaluates in *Holes* and is also, in this case, interpretative in the extreme. The fact that every single camera position always also implies a particular narrative perspective has long since become a feature of film. In *Stripping* the close-up shot of the woman on the floor taken marginally from below gains an extra dimension from the viewer's overview of the architectural situation. Hubbard / Birchler had already seen two narrative perspectives combined in Gustave Flaubert's novel Madame Bovary, which, as a narrative structure, provided the starting point for *Stripping*. The difference between distance and proximity, panoramic landscape

descriptions and the meticulous account of a person's inner soul culminates here in an omniscience that is only enjoyed by God and the directors Hubbard / Birchler, who can apply as they like the full force of any narrative means they care to choose.[16] While the woman on the floor thus remains perfectly still and listens, the viewer - together with the so-called omniscient narrator - has a sense of knowing more, even if there is actually little to be seen aside from the 'stage set'. The dark dividing lines on the prints have, beyond their three-dimensional constructive function, a two-dimensional purpose that is both compositional and temporal. As a boundary line between inside and outside, above and below, they call to mind the black lines dividing the panels in a comic strip, or the unexposed strips between the individual frames on a roll of celluloid film. *Stripping*, as a series of interrupted camera movements, thus suggests a sequence of time, in effect uniting two different media and concepts of temporality, in that the simultaneity of the frozen photographic image - which is evident in the ambiguous poses - is pitted against a filmic sequence.

In its very openness *Stripping* depicts a kind of permanent slow motion, which - like the objects slipping to the ground in *Falling Down* - remains in eternal limbo. Can the woman in the shed really see something or should her gaze merely be taken as a temporary halt? This in-between, like the suspended money or shoes, is carefully constructed, in the sense that the proximity of the protagonist to the dark line, which has to be read as a sign of an (interpretative) void, in effect means that she is in two places at one: one physical, the other psychical. Thus Hubbard / Birchler bring together formal, structural and narrative elements within one and the same space-time narrative.

The Disposition of Space and Narration

The ensemble *Gregor's Room I III*, 1998/99, consisting of four photographic diptychs, a video-piece, and an over-sized view of a room from above, has a particularly close connection with the series *Stripping*: Firstly, the interpretative standpoint of the camera, the point of view, is deployed in such a radical manner that its use as a cinematic tool is scarcely different to its use in film. Secondly, *Gregor's Room* also has a fore-runner in literature. The name Gregor is an allusion to Gregor Samsa in Kafka's Metamorphosis, and his room, "rather too small for a human being", is at the core of the work. As in *Stripping*, Hubbard / Birchler are less interested in the literary fiction itself than in the possibility of transposing this into a photographic or filmic medium. Even though they have reconstructed Gregor's room from the few details given in the story as a deceptively real film-set, the space itself takes center stage as a narrative disposition and protagonist that one cannot help but notice as the figure interacts with it. The set with the nostalgic, flowery wallpaper, the little old bed and the blurred black-and-white photograph on the wall creates a dense atmosphere of its own and is less the place for an external metamorphosis of a man into a monstrous beetle than the place for an inner metamorphosis. The room in Kafka's short story has four openings: three doors and a window, a spatial disposition that now allows the narrative possibilities of the film-set to be exploited from all four directions, as well as from outside and from above. In the video-piece Gregor's Room II, four sequences follow each other in a continuous loop, each separated from the other by an undefined black field. A camera on a track running round the outside of the set was used to film the removals man in such a way that he seems to be

entirely encircled. The dark voids, as in *Stripping*, seem like built architectural structures, as well as adding a rhythmic element to the whole. At the same time they momentarily exclude the viewer plunged into blackness, alone in the dark. The activities of the protagonist are neither continuous nor cyclical, since the sequence of his individual actions in Gregor's room is irreversible. The man packs away the books, sits down and eats an apple, rests on the bed and finally sweeps the room with a broom while mattress and boxes stand ready for the move. While the sequence of individual scenes here shows the room through a different opening each time so that little by little it is seen in its entirety, in the slightly distorted, 'Kafkaesque' view in *Gregor's Room III* the whole space is seen at once. Here the narrative perspective describes the possible state of mind of the man in overalls sitting far below in the room and, through the sharp focus on the objects lying on the floor such as tube, screws and building debris, creates an energy running counter to the downwards pull. Due to the size of the format the room itself seems almost like a simulation of the built film-set, intended to affect the viewer's own bodily awareness. In the four diptychs, Gregor's Room I, the life-sized stature of the well-dressed man had already created a confrontational situation. He seems to be the first to walk into an almost empty room; like the removals man and the man in overalls, he is a minor character removing any traces of Gregor. The absence of the actual protagonist is captured in the eloquent decor, which seems to speak constantly of him, and entwines the intruder in its tales. Each figure, including the well-dressed man, possibly the property agent, relates somehow to the narrative layers on the walls of the room which seems to mutate into the source of its own story.

While the poses in *Stripping* were an unquantifiable element in the supposed plot-line, which seemed to recall filmstills, the diptychs in *Gregor's Room I* are somewhat more complex. Here the 'shot/countershot' method from film is used to show two figures in conversation, one after the other in the same place and seen through the eyes of the other, a dialogue with oneself, an inner monologue. Any minor discrepancy in an action, however insignificant, for instance in the way a handkerchief is folded, marks a temporality - although without a distinguishable beforehand and afterwards. In the to and fro of the diptych the linearity of a narrative gives way to a supra-temporal uncertainty. Again a minimal action is closely linked to moments of private withdrawal and introspection. The boundary between inconsequentiality and enlightenment, between nothing and everything, is thus seen here as movement hither and thither, and when the two come together each is seen to determine the other. Andy Warhol similarly used a small technical manipula tion to transcend the commonplace in his six-hour film *Sleep*, 1963, where the same shot of a sleeping man is shown at a speed of 16 instead of 24 frames per second. The deconstruction of the cinematic continuum and the concomitant hypnotic effect generated a new dimension of the visible which came into being solely by using the technical equipment as a device in its own right. The supra-temporal uncertainty arising from the differences between the two parts of each diptych in *Gregor's Room I*, gives the ambiguous poses from *Stripping* a new degree of tension. The poses are ambiguous in the sense that it is impossible to decide whether they conform to a gender-specific code which superseded the individual and can thus be understood as determined by society, or whether they simply depict an action frozen in time. Hubbard / Birchler's poses are, however, not like filmstills, which are

not made by stopping the film but which in fact portray a whole drama in a single photograph and are therefore dependent on specific cliched roles: in Hubbard / Birchler's case one might more accurately talk of pseudo poses or bodily positions, albeit not to the extent of Sherman's postmodern performance of hysteria.[17] The bodily positions are all too ambivalent to be read as the expression of a systematized language of gestures.

On the contrary, *Gregor's Room I* articulates a specific temporality of photography, which operates on a similar basis to 'simulative' sculptures. The stuffed animals and body casts pre-empted the medium, and the act of photographing the photographed led to a form of duplication. The ambiguous pseudo poses thus have their roots in a concept of time that is genuinely photographic and itself goes back to the earliest daguerrotypes, which required such a long exposure time that, as Walter Benjamin put it, they "[,..] caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure the subject as it were grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snap-shot [...]".[18] Because of the way that the subjects as it were inscribe themselves into the picture, Benjamin talks of the technical basis of the auratic result and attributes just such an effect to these early photographs. The auratic quality, which is, according to Benjamin, due entirely to distance, however close it may seem, may be described in *Gregor's Room I* as an urgently heightened presence with a compressed temporality that brings a cinematic dimension into play. An imitative performance on the part of the actor thus creates a first layer of unclarity which is then frozen a second time through the photographic act, thereby opening up the widest possible potential for

these figures. This elusive momentariness shows, as Peter Weibel has put it, that there is no sharp division between cinematography and photography, just de-grees of difference.[19]

The Architecture of Appearances

In Hubbard / Birchler's work the potentiality described above is the actual location of the cinematic experience, as it had been similarly anticipated in the pictures ofVermeer or of Edward Hopper.[20] But in contrast to these painterly solutions, the photographic works of Hubbard / Birchler are the outcome of a systematic reflection on the medium of photography, which itself generates this particular temporality. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note in passing that in their nine-part photo series *Arsenal*, 2000, Hubbard / Birchler (besides Jeff Wall's Untangling, 1994) specifically allude to Hopper's painting *New York Movie*, 1939. The blond woman, distractedly waiting for cinema-goers outside the slightly dingy entrance to the auditorium, is readily recognizable by her gesture as a quotation. These two quotations serve Hubbard / Birchler as a means to locate their work within existing artistic positions, for Arsenal can be read as a transitional work, confirming the appropriation of certain means with a reflective glance backwards. This series may also be seen as a transition because the protagonist is only present in five photographs, which together suggest a wider context in the perpetually deserted cinema. In one she leans in a bored manner across the counter, then she flashes her torch along the rows of seats, next she clears bottles away or tries to sort out a tangled roll of film in the projection room. The sequence of the actions can only be guessed at, and yet they all have something to do with the invisible film that is central to the

whole. The unseen film in *Arsenal* is only ever implied in the individual photographs which themselves become the broken-up continuum of another film, a film about the blond woman. This dislocation recalls *Gregor's Room*, yet *Arsenal* is conceived differently in the sense that the monumentalizations of the silent apparatuses and the filmic fiction dissolving in the brightly streaming light of the film are constantly connected with the presence of the protagonist, who seems to be everywhere, having only just stepped out of the frame of the picture for a moment. But *Arsenal* may above all be regarded as a transition because for the first time Hubbard / Birchler left their studio and took the photographs in an actual Berlin cinema.

Even if it should be no more than chance, nevertheless it is interesting that, bearing in mind the history of cinematographic illusion, Hubbard / Birchler's work has developed along the same lines as the cinema. The sequence of 'simulative' sculptures, dioramas, rear projections, stage sets and film sets reads much like a short history of cinema. For indeed was it not the dioramas that preceded film as a form of mass media, and continued to survive as specially created film architecture and sets? Later on film sought to escape its extravagant studio sets and turned to real settings. At the end of this spectrum we therefore no longer find architectural fictions but, as in Arsenal and the digitally-mastered cinema facades in the as-yet unfinished series *Filmstills*, 2000, the cinema itself as the architecture of appearances and illusion. Hubbard / Birchler have thus arrived at and in the cinema, and in their latest works are logically enough dealing with film per se.

(*Translation: Fiona Ellliot*)

Footnotes

1 See Kerry Brougher (ed.). Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of
Mirrors, Los Angeles 1996; exh. cat.
Moving Images. Film -
Reflexion in der Kunst, Galerie fur zeitgenbsslsche Kunst
Leipzig, Leipzig 1999; exh. cat,
Cinema, Cinema. Contempo-
rary Art and the Cinematic Experience, Stedelijk Van Abbe-
museum, Eindhoven 1999.

2 In A. D. Coleman's well known essay "The Directorial Mode:

Notes Toward a Definition" (1976) there is clearly a whole
new understanding of photography, when the author - still
in ignorance of postmodern staged photography - writes:

"The substantial distinction, then, is between treating the
external world as a given, to be altered only through photo-
graphic means [...] en route to the final image, or rather as
raw material, to be itself manipulated as much as desired
prior to the exposure of the negative", in: idem, Light
Readings. A Photography Critic's Writings 1968-1978, pp.
246-57, here pp. 251-2. According to A. D. Coleman even
'straight photography' involves staging in the sense that
Edward Weston, for instance, first placed the green pepper
inside a tin funnel.

3 Danto, Arthur C., "Fotografie und Performance: Die Stills
derCindySherman", p. 11, in: CindySherman. Untitled Film
Stills, Munich 1990, pp. 5-15.

4 Photography did not exist as yet of course; it would not be
"invented" until the late 1830s by the same Daguerre who
patented the diorama with Bouton in 1822.

5 Heinz Buddemeier, Panorama. Diorama. Fotografie.
Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert,
Munich 1970, pp. 41-42.

6 Thomas Kellein, "Eine Kunst, die keinen Glauben lehrt",
p. 11, in: exh. cat. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Time Exposed, Kunst-
halle Basel, publ. Stuttgart 1995, pp. 9-15.

7 Georges Didi-Huberman, Ahnlichkeit und Beruhrung.
Archaologie, Anachronismus und Modernitat des Abdrucks,
Cologne 1999, p. 116.

8 Umberto Eco, "Die Festungen der Einsamkeit", p. 40, in:

idem, Liber Gott und die Welt. Essays und Glossen, Munich
1996, pp. 36-45.

9 Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", p. 2, in:

idem, Simulacra and Simulations, transl. by Sheila Faria
Glaser, Michigan 1994, pp. 1-42.

10 See Gottfried Boehm, "Die Bilderfrage", p. 366, in: idem
(ed.), Was 1st ein Bild? Munich 1994, pp. 325-343; Gundolf
Winter, "Das Bild zwischen Medium und Kunst", p. 21ff. in:

Gundolf Winter and Yvonne Spielmann (eds), Bild - Medium
- Kunst, Munich 1999, pp. 15-30.

11 Kerry Brougher, "Hitch-Hiking in Dreamscapes", p. 18, in:

exh. cat. 'Notorious'. Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art,

Museum of Modern Art Oxford, Oxford 1999, pp. 8-20.

12 Exh. cat. Teresa Hubbard und Alexander Birchler. Slow
Place, Museum fur Gegenwartskunst Basel, Basel 1997, p. 16.

13 Philip Ursprung, 'You Should Have Stayed in Your Room!'
Recalling Rooms: Stories and Architecture in the Photo-
graphs of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, Zurich
1998, S. 13-21.

14 Gerrit Gohike, "In Wirklichkeit", p. 30, in: exh. cat.
National Gallery Prague, Wroclaw 1998, pp. 4-36.

15 Philip Ursprung (as note 13), p. 15.

16 It is interesting to note that Hubbard/Birchler refer to
the connection between a 19th-century novel and their
photography, since specifically Flaubert's Madame Bovary
owed a great deal to the new medium of photography. The
simultaneous emergence of literary realism and photo-
graphy explains the unmistakable signs of a typically
photographic mode of seeing and perceiving in the prose of
that time. See Rolf H. Krauss, Fotografie und Literatur. Zur
fotografischen Wahrnehmung in der deutschen Literatur
des 19. Jahrhunderts, Stuttgart 1999.

17 Elisabeth Bronfen, "Das andere Selbst der Einbildungs-
kraft: Cindy Shermans hysterische Performanz":, p. 20, in:

exh. cat. Cindy Sherman. Fotoarbeiten 1975-1995, Kunst-
museum Luzern, Deichtorhallen Hamburg and elsewhere,
Munich 1995, pp. 13-26.

18 Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography",
p. 245, in: idem, One-Way Street, translated by Edmund
Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London 1979, pp. 240-257.

19 Weibel, Peter: "Das fotografische Grossbild im Zeitalter
der Geschwindigkeit", p. 104, in: Noema, no. 42, Aug.-Oct.
1996, pp. 102-107.

20 See Anne L. Hollander, Moving Pictures, New York 1989.