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From the Outside to the Inside and Back Again
An Attempt at an Approach to the Works of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler

The works of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler allow for a variety of approaches and interpretations. In the following, I will begin with their exceptional interlocking of theatrical and pictorial space-with the purpose of simultaneously allowing myself to go with the flow of other possible interpretations. This text therefore neither concerns itself with a chronological account of an oeuvre nor with an exhaustive reading of it; rather, it is an attempt to sound out several possible points of access to their work in addition to some further twists and turns.

Territories of the Stage and Camera

The photographic and video scenarios by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler unfurl showplaces of transition in a complex manner. They frequently *transpire* in a continuous transition between the territories of the stage (or the film set, respectively), in front of which, on which, and behind which something is shown and hidden, and the territories of the camera, which is hot in pursuit of the game of hide-and-seek played out in front of, on, and behind the stage that simultaneously reveals and covers it up, overlooks it, catches up with it, and overtakes it. Accordingly, the storyline of *Single Wide,* 2002 (pages 115-117), a true *hors-champ* masterpiece, is decisively propelled by things occurring beyond the picture frame, and the camera always shows up either too early or too late at the scene of the event.

As in *Stripping,* 1998 (pages 52-59); Gregor's *Room I-III,* 1998-99 (pages 83-87); and *Detached Building,* 2001 (pages 111-113), the theatrical staging of the action area here corresponds to the model of the classic proscenium stage that itself becomes a (co)-protagonist of the performance, a site and actant of permanent metamorphosis. The room described by Franz Kafka in his story *The Metamorphosis* as "a proper human room although a little too small" with an opening on all four walls (a window and three doors) provided the artists with a perfect model. They not only reconstructed it for *Gregor's Room I-III,* but also staged it in various ways over the course of Part I to Part III[1].

The four photographic diptychs that make up *Gregor's Room* I still plumb the depths of the interior from the inside (pages 86-87). In the process, each space is organized in an interlocking of shot/reverse shot that grasps a person (and his doppelganger) by means of his minimally staggered poses. The photograph *Gregor's Room /II* (page 83), on the other hand, deduces the same theatrical architecture as a proscenium stage-namely from an aerial perspective, meaning that it introduces a "fifth wall." This not only simply makes a further perspective of the interior possible, but it also shows the false decor either in the process of being built or taken down. Is the man who appears in it a stagehand?

In the video *Gregor's Room II* (below), the four openings of the "small human room" are finally brought into play. The camera encircles the enclosed stage space from the outside in a seemingly

continuous tracking shot that allows one to look inside the space solely through the window and the three doors. The stage is turned into a variable proscenium stage that opens up each scene from the perspective of a different place. The "fourth wall" shifts from scene to scene, thereby opening one perspective while closing another one. The rhythm produced in this manner, which equally includes the stage performance as well as the flow of the camera image, suggests the "Camera Lucida" shutter mechanism.[2] The techniques of the stage, the camera, and the image are correlated, but they are also simultaneously played out against each other: The stage therefore remains visible as a constructed piece of scenery, whereby the camera only follows the act of metamorphosis, i.e., the opening and closing of the stage space, after the fact. By encircling the stage it produces its own image-based succession of openings and closings-and analogously of an interior and the outer skin, pictures and "picture pauses" which, in turn, are negotiated during the post-production phase along the lines of, as well as in opposition to, the pictorial rhetoric of the cinema. The picture pause makes an invisible cut possible, which Hubbard and Birchler deployed here as well as in *Detached Building* and *Single Wide-but* not, however, to maintain an illusion,' rather, to introduce breaks within this illusion. The invisible cut in *Gregor's* Room II which, in the flow of the picture pauses, swallows up the metamorphosis (the *act of* metamorphosis) of the stage space, makes possible the illusion of the space-time continuum of a panoramic view. But at the same time a gap is cut into this very view. The picture pauses with their invisible cuts that divide the scenarios taking place in the interior into four episodes-a man sweeps the room I packs things I rests on a bed I eats an apple-very noticeably mask for long periods that which has been happening on the stage in the meantime. Particularly because of the illusion of a space-time continuum, two contradictory, but seemingly parallel, simultaneous realities become very conspicuous: The reality of our all-encompassing, uninterrupted view as well as that which it has apparently missed. Being present and being absent, the integration and exclusion of the viewer are indissolubly linked to each other.

The invisible cut additionally arranges a picture loop that counteracts the construction of a linear temporality. There is neither a beginning nor an end in this mise-en-scène, no before or after, only the simultaneousness of the unsimultaneous-of action and the area of action, the stage and image, the viewer and viewed.

Dwellings

Hubbard and Birchler also plumb the depths of the play between the congruence and incongruence of theatrical space and pictorial space in *Single Wide, Detached Building,* and *Eight, 2001* (pages 104-109). The stage, with its false walls in which the "theatrical subject is organized around entrances and exits"[4]-a theatrical subject that, in *Gregor's Room,* is the stage itself-is maintained and stripped at the same time as an illusion of space.[5] The view behind the scenes produces only the appearance of looking behind the scenes. Like a nested doll, every peeling away of the illusionistic surface only leads to the next illusion, just as every transition between interior and exterior, subject and object, presence and absence-only leads to the next transition. Hubbard and Birchler's first joint project, the installation *Small Town,* 1990, was a

spatial labyrinth made out of doors, an ensemble of thresholds in which the entrances and the exits, the showing and the hiding, are interlocked. In a certain sense, this ensemble anticipates the architecture and scenery of many subsequent pieces. They all represent models of dwellings that figure as linchpins, stages, and actants of the narrative's inner and outer conflicts. They are frequently referred to in the piece's title. The title *Single Wide* thus denotes the one-room model of that type of American prefabricated house that marked the end of the dream of a mobile home. While covered wagons and trailers still promised their inhabitants the trek to a better life, the "single-wide" unit designated being comfortably stuck at the outskirts of society.[6] Equipped with the miniaturized standards of middle-class home decor, it constantly points out where one would like to go and where one will never arrive.

Single Wide (pages 115-117) revolves precisely around this type of prefabricated house as well as around a pickup truck, a kind of getaway vehicle that, however, does not help anyone to escape. The container home[7] is open on one side so that we can take a look inside, as into a dollhouse. The camera slowly tracks past the accommodation units of the scenery, which are separated from each other by narrow walls: the children's room, the eat-in kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedroom follow in succession. The camera then leaves the interior of the showcase on its seemingly uninterrupted path and lands in front of t he house's protective shell and looks back once more from the outside through the window into the bedroom. If the transition from accommodation unit to accommodation unit is rhythmized by the narrow beams of the inner partitions like a film or comic strip,[8] then the exit from the inside to the outside and vice versa the entrance from the outside to the inside-is marked by a viewing or picture pause, respectively. It concerns that very moment of the visibly concealed which Hubbard and Birchler had already adopted as their own while riding past the outer skin of the stage in *Gregor's Room*.

After the picture pause, the camera arrives at the front of the house and pans to the pickup truck standing in front of it. The camera orbits around it in order to return from here-after a further picture pause-to the open rear of the container home. The succession-accommodation unit interior | exit from the interior | picture pause A1| look back into the bedroom from the outside | picture pause A2 | pan to front | orbiting of the pickup truck | picture pause B | entrance into the interior-takes place twice. The third orbit takes place without the loop around the pickup truck because it is now protruding out of the front of the house. What has happened? Like in all of Hubbard and Birchler's narratives, this one also leaves behind a number of inconsistencies.

Let us follow the loop again in the sense of an approach that, like in all of Hubbard and Birchler's videos, can always proceed from a construed starting point that is nowhere to be taken for granted: there is the children 's room with a dollhouse and other toys including a very noticeable faceless doll-in some sense serving as a counterpoint to the dollhouse, which, like the decor of the home itself, so candidly allows inspection. Alongside it are posters of teen stars and a group of kitsch items. It is the realm of a girl who has outgrown childhood but nevertheless seems stuck there. The camera reaches the eat-in kitchen and with it a scenario of destruction. A young woman wearing a checkered flannel shirt crawls out of the wreckage. She fishes for a bag that has the same pattern as her shirt. Along with the

camera she moves past the still-intact bathroom to the bedroom that has likewise been spared from the chaos. She puts down the bag, sits in front of a dresser, and examines the laceration on her head in the mirror. The camera exits from the bedroom and a picture pause (A1) follows until the camera enters the bedroom again from the outside through a window The woman takes the bag, leaves the house, and finally sits down in the truck that the camera encircles. Does she want to abandon her destroyed home with the most important items from it packed in the bag that resembles her? When and to what end was this bag packed in the first place? A cell phone rings. She turns it off. While one hears, but does not see, how a car drives off, the camera returns inside the abandoned dwelling via the picture pause (B). But nothing is the way it was before, because the accommodation units, untouched by any hint of destruction, pass before our eyes. An eerie jump in time must have occurred. But when? The telephone rings inside the house, but nobody is there any longer-or not yet there-to take the call. While one hears, but does not see, how a car is approaching, the camera returns outside via the picture pause (A2). It encircles the truck as if it had never left. The woman sits in the truck as if she too had never left. Even the wound on her face can still be seen. But didn't a jump in time occur? She is visibly excited, cries, shouts out loud, and hits the steering wheel. While the camera moves along the picture pause (B) back to the open side of the container home, the woman takes off in the direction of the house. We hear, but do not see, how the truck runs straight into the house. There follows the look into the children's room and the kitchen, into which half of the truck is now stuck with the woman still inside. The bathroom passes by as well as the bedroom from the inside and outside. The camera reaches the front of the house, out of which the other half of the truck protrudes. Then: the picture pause (B), the children's room, the chaos in the kitchen from which the woman crawls out again. Only now, upon a second glance that is only seemingly richer in causal indications, one notices the fragments of the truck there from which the woman salvages her bag. She arrives in the bedroom, looks at her wound, takes the bag and leaves via the door after a picture pause (A2). Again, one now first notices in the repetition of the occurrences that the eerie, visibly invisible jump in time took place here, because the truck that in fact must be protruding from the front of the house is no longer there after the picture pause, but stands in front of the house into which it will later violently crash instead.

Symptoms

With its constant entrances and exits, the camera-and thus also our view-becomes the dominant "theatrical subject" in *Single Wide*. The woman, on the other hand, enters the scenario only at one place: the moment in which she leaves the house and the eerie jump in time occurs. She is otherwise either already there or already gone. She does not inhabit the site of her actions, but visits these places of escape rather as a revenant: as a ghost whose comings and goings are unannounced but begin rather with the repetition.[9] The stage in turn appears as the *actant* of its own masking and unmasking, the covering and uncovering of that which occurs on, in front of, and behind it. It is crisscrossed in the process by the camera, which is occupied with itself, with its clockwork-like entrances and exists. However, that which occurs, and which will occur, takes place solely in the blind spots of its seemingly omnipresent view.

Only the visibly invisible jump in time during which past and present, the no longer and the not yet, become one, is not missed by it.

Taking up Jacques Lacan's sole reference to science fiction, Slavoj Zizek established "the symptom as the return of the repressed *returning from the future,"* because the "meaning of the symptom is not uncovered by analysis, but rather constructed by it."[10] At first, the jump in time in *Single Wide* that was visibly withdrawn from our view seemed to point to the past. It is as if something should have being undone at the moment in which the truck protruding from the house had disappeared-and with it the hole in the house, the story's other wound-but something that, because the jump in time was overtaken by a time warp, would inevitably be repeated for all eternity, or at least for as long as the image machine is in operation. They-the woman, the image machine, the truck-will always do it again and have already done it leaving, returning, breaking in, breaking out, and the wounding of the house in addition to its miraculous healing.

Freud linked the symptom-which appears here in a nexus and interaction of home, wound, and woman-to repetition compulsion.[11] "When the repressed," Zizek writes on the other hand, "returns from the future, not from the past, then the transference must simply ... take us into a future."[12] This "taking into a future" of the symptom is, through the concept of repetition, already implicit in the works of Hubbard and Birchler, all of which deal with the return of the repressed. It simuItaneously designates the field of interpretation (the "transference") that the artists bring into play in a special way. This can be seen in the fact that they very deliberately eliminate any unambiguity in their works; their narratives are full of contradictions and misleading references leading one astray.[13] Their mise-en-scènes are dedicated to the future viewer who will read each scene in always new and always different and diverging ways: a viewer from whom it is not only required that he accepts the gaps and hidden aspects of the narrative, but also the fact that any reading he chooses to make will also make him lose sight of another equally possible interpretation - that he too produces the gaps in a constitutive manner and thus "takes it into a future." In this sense, Hubbard and Birchler stand in the tradition of those artists from James Joyce to Stan Douglas who evoked the possibility that something can at once be one thing and also another, whose works liberated interpretation into the realm of an open process.

Zizek further writes, "And insofar as a core of enjoyment persists in the symptom that resists any and all interpretations, then the end of analysis is perhaps also not to be sought in an interpretative dissolution of the symptom, but rather in an *identification* with it, in an identification of the subject with this unanalyzable point."[14]

With their mise-en-scènes-in the sense of a performative interaction between stage, action, actor, actant, camera image, and viewer-Hubbard and Birchler simultaneously generate interpretability and non-interpretability. They not only deal with the return of the repressed, they generate it to a certain extent.

Territories of Habitation

The conflicts in the works of Hubbard and Birchler often deal with the symptoms of becoming a woman and being a woman-as someone who is locked in *(Stripping)* or expelled from *(Detached Building)* the territories of habitation as well as a border crosser and a revenant between the inclusions and exclusions of these territories *(Eight, Single Wide, House with Pool)*. *Detached Building* demonstrates in a particular way that the habitation of territories remains reserved for men-and in Gregor's *Room* perhaps, how this privilege can become a trap.

The youngest female border crosser between the protecting home and inhabiting the world appears in Eight (pages 104-109). The video's title refers at once to the age of the protagonist as well as the structure of the narrative. It takes place in a garden that is framed by the coulisse of a residential house and its fragmentary double. The camera orbits between the interior and exterior of this accommodation unit standing opposite itself in a seemingly continuous loop. We see the girl in front of the window. Outside it is raining cats and dogs. Inside it is dry. The camera moves to the right to a table with a lamp. It suddenly moves seamlessly over to the garden. The wall with the window and the girl in front of it turns out to be an artificial partition wall placed in the garden that nevertheless paradoxically protects against the rain. Interior and exterior, protection and helplessness are matters of one's perspective. Arriving in the garden, the camera not only shows the first signs of a birthday party that has fallen through but also the facade of a residential house in the background. The view through the window indicates that it is something that it in fact cannot be-the house from which the girl was looking through the window just a moment ago but whose false wall should actually be behind or adjacent to our view The child, however, spectrally misplaced as it were, leaves the house on the opposite side and busies herself with the flooded remains of the party. She does not seem to be concerned about where inside and outside are located-or about where she herself is located. She cuts herself a piece of the birthday cake into which she will never bite. In the economy of desire, desire revolves solely around the desire for desire, while *jouissance* conforms to immediate satisfaction. The deferred lust to take a bite out of the cake possibly conjures up that moment in which she-the girl-could pass into womanhood. Before the girl can take a bite, the camera again takes in the still life comprising the remnants of the party. It abruptly glides into the interior of the house from which the girl has just come. The girl enters this room, whereby nothing signals that she has been standing in the rain. One hears guests off in the distance, but the girl-the later woman who returned from the future as a girl?-makes a beeline for the window that will soon stand in the garden, and proceeds straightaway, ignoring in the process the borders between inside and outside, home and work, here and there, on the path of her desire. Her comings and goings, entrances and exits, are not only interlocked with an eerie time warp, but also with the implosion of spatial order, the breakdown of the borders that she permanently perambulates.

At the Boundaries of the Relatable

In a certain sense, the girl from Eight encounters the next stage on her way to becoming a woman, as well as the woman she could have become, in *House with Pool* (pages 122-135). The unexplained relationship between two women of different ages is at the core of the video. It could be a mother and daughter or even a woman and her own recollections of herself. The elder of the two women inhabits the house with pool-or rather she tries to and is constantly unsuccessful-while the younger woman, on the other hand, successfully haunts it. *House with Pool* is simultaneously a nexus of numerous potential encounters going in opposite directions and occurring with unstoppable dynamism as well as a narrative-if one can speak of a narrative here-about non-encounters: between two women, between two women and a man, between the past and the present, between the subject and the object, between the conscious and the unconscious, between dream and reality Compensatory acts and objects that generate links and yet suspend the encounter between the actors who orbit each other like alien planets are brought into play here: piano playing, a cardigan, photographs, water, drains, two deer, cleansing rituals, the opening and closing of doors, and so on. They operate like objects of exchange yet nothing is exchanged by them, because they only carry what is absent through the story. As in most of Hubbard and Birchler's videos, there is no dialogue in House with Pool, or at least no spoken dialogue. Instead, everything here-the house, the pool, the women, the man, the objects of exchange, the music, the sounds-is an actant of a narrative that, however, leads nowhere, that only glides from turn to turn, from possibility to possibility. Unlike *Gregor's Room, Single Wide, Detached Building, and Eight,* the settings of *House with Pool* are not exposed. The work additionally does not simulate constant, un interrupted tracking shots; rather, its long pans alongside interiors and exteriors are crisscrossed by a succession of innumerable cuts, around which the entries, exits, and re-entries of the "theatrical subjects" are organized in countless intertwined loops. It again only seems like a classic cinematic narration at first glance because the intricately interlaced loop suspends any form of linear narrative or temporal structure and the abundance of divergent signifiers and possible readings do not allow for a coherent story. It is, rather, a question dealing with the inquiry about how far the mise-en-scène of instable (spatial, temporal, narrative, sexual) circumstances compel the simultaneousness of the unsimultaneous-and in how far the return of the repressed can be carried into the future. In doing so, an exceedingly eloquent ensemble without words at the boundaries of the relatable is created.

1 Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's joint artistic practice is based to a large extent on their wideranging experiments with the production of architectural models, stages, and visual displays: in the sense of autonomous sculpture (for example, On *loon from* the museum in us [page 14[and *The First and* the lost, both 1993) as well as in the sense of an action area for their photographs and videos (for example *Noah's Ark: Unpocking, lunchbreok, Working, 1992* [pages 12-13); *Stripping,* 199B; *Gregor's Room 11-111,1999).* See, among others: Philipp Kaiser, 'An der Grenze der Photographie: in Martin Hentschel, ed., *Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler-WildWalls* exh. cat Haus Lange, Krefeld (Bielefeld, 2001); Stephan Urbaschek, ·Zugleich drinnen und draussen sein: [in Gespräch mit Teresa Hubbard und Alexander Birchler, ~ in Sammlung Goetz, ed., *Imagination Becomes* Reality. Port II: Pointing *Surface Space,* exh. cat. Sammlung Goetz Munich, ZKM Karlsruhe, (Munich, 2005) (http://www.hubbardbirchler.net/tex*ts/* urbaschek_interview_g.html).

2 Alexander Birchler has commented, *'One* day I simply got on my bicycle and rode around the set in regular circles observing the room. The room's open doors and window made me think of the shutter mechanism of a camera while J rode past these openings. So we finally mounted a camera on the bicycle.' Translated after Urbaschek, 2005 (see note 2).

3 It has often been painted out that this trick was used for the first time by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1948 production of *Rope* in order to suggest the impression of a single uninterrupted tracking shot. In *Rope,* Hitchcock had the actor move in front of the camera, blocking the entire screen. This enabled him to mask the edit by panning from the person's back.

4 Judy Radul, 'Stage Fright: The Theatricality of Performance,· in Peter Pakesch, ed., *Videodreams: Between the Cinematic and the Theatrical,* exh. cat. Kunsthaus Graz (Cologne, 2004). 113.

5 for the *Stripping* series of photographs, the title of which refers to the act of disrobing, Hubbard and Birchler designed a series of architectural models between stage and dwelling for the first time that was laid open as scenery.

6 These so-called mobile homes can only *be* transported with great difficulty, so they are usually not removed

from the places where they are initially parked· trailer parks on the outskirts of town as a general rule, or in rural areas.

7 A stage unit that is here no longer built in the studio, as In *Stripping* and *Gregor's Room,* but out in the open.

8 This architectonically created motif appears for the first time in *Stripping*

9 *See* Jacques Derrida, *Specters* of *Marx. The* State o(the *Debt, the Work* o(*Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York,1994): 10.

10 Translated after Slavoj Zizek, liebe *Dein Symptom wie Dich se/bst! Jacques Lacans Psychoanalyse und die Medien* (8erlln, 1991): 9.

11 Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety,' *Standard* Edition o(the *Complete Psychological Works* o(Sigmund *Freud* (New York, 1959)

12 See Slavoj Zizek, 1991 (note 10): 10.

13 Is the young woman in *Single Wide* the child who never outgrew her girl's room, or is she the mother of the absent child? What is it that drives her to leave home yet also binds her to it-thus inducing the act of destruction? Her own past? The absent child? Does she really want to flee at all?

14 See Slavoj Zizek, 1991 (note 10): 261.