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New position in media art-installations

From Spark to Pixel: Art + New Media, Martin-Gropius-Bau.
Berlin. October 27, 2007 — January 14, 2008

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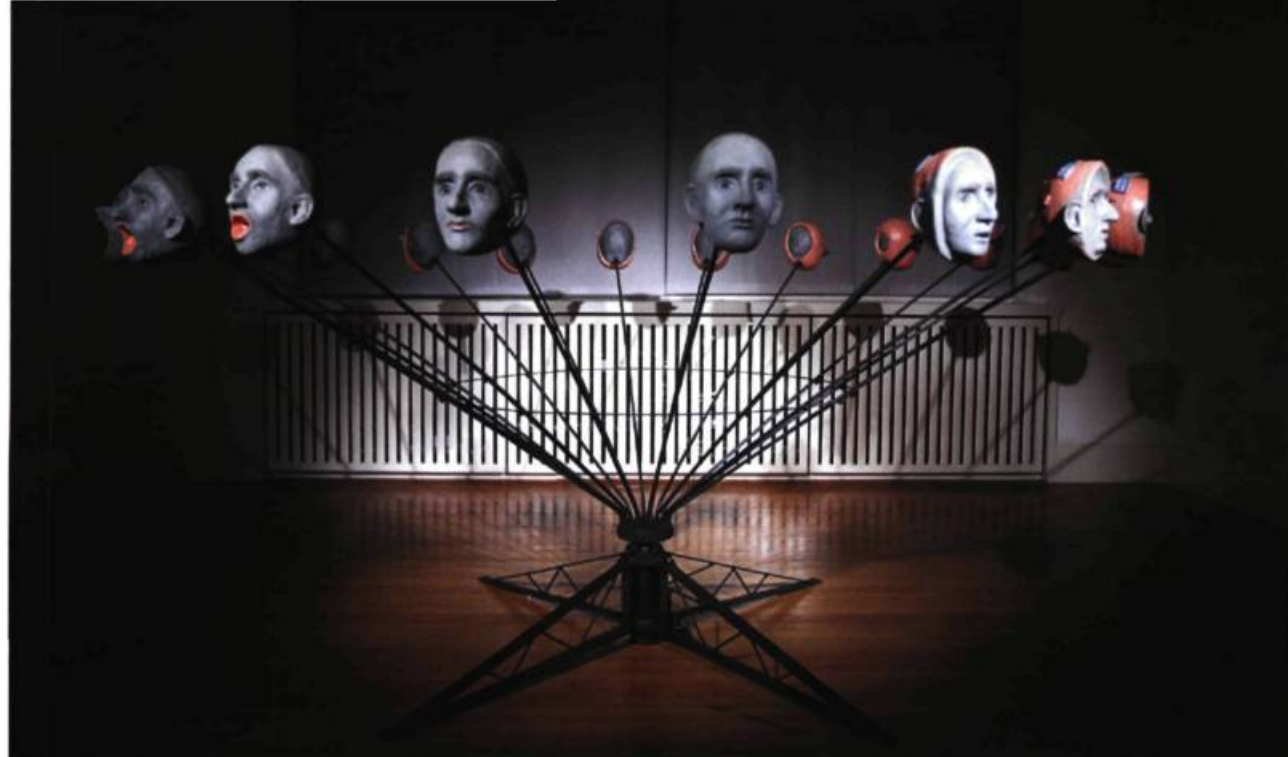
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Berlin

NEW POSITIONS IN MEDIA ART-INSTALLATIONS

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ny renewal of representation will necessarily be accompanied, if not beckoned by the sights and sounds of the historical specters enveloping it.¹

Picture the architectural ground plan of an antique Roman villa, just larger: a central atrium,

glass roofed here, surrounded by numerous rooms, some with richly carved ceiling decorations. This is an approximate description of the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, a superb building for the large-scale exhibition *From Spark to Pixel: Art + New Media*, curated by Richard Castelli (Paris). The show was nothing short of spectacular comparable to the baroque *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis of the arts. Twenty international artists, mainly men, and their collaborators presented new positions in media art-installations

that provided entries into sight and sound spaces, some with trance effects. In other words, an ecstatic experience or a supernatural vision could be had. Word spread quickly and many young ticket holders came immersing themselves into a new art with admiring endurance levels. The exhibition had a loose, historical sequence starting with *Candle TV* (1975) by the pioneer of electronic art, Nam June Paik (South Korea/USA) where a burning candle was set into an empty wooden TV, followed by *Feuerkasten* (Fire Box, 1991) by KAI (Germany) containing a bird-headed monster that spits fire when a button is pushed. Gregory Barsamian (USA) in *Scream* (1998) had rubber masks of his own face mounted on a ring-like mechanism that rotates to enormous speed inspired by the zoetrope drum, a forerunner of



Ulf Langheinrich, *Under Hemisphere* (detail), 2006. Courtesy of: Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin.



cinema. But what he most freely employed was a synchronized stroboscope. Interestingly, a sign put up by local personnel warned people of possible dizziness when watching. *Scream* is an impressive visualization of mind clutter harmless to one's health. The show was also popular among parents whose children sat mesmerized, as I observed, on a long bench watching *Visp* (2002) by Christian Partos (Sweden). Rotating machinery, nine meters in length, spins light-wires like skipping ropes, producing changing light patterns, surface effects you wanted to catch, see longer, but could not except by extended watching. The percep-

tual strategies employed by all the artists was an unfolding of their work over time, hence the many benches to sit on, or beanbags to lie on, as under *Hemisphere* (2006/07) by Ulf Langheinrich (Austria/Ghana) where people waited patiently to get their empty spot. Watching *Visp* and hearing the grinding noise of the computer generated, rotating mechanism, I thought of Denis Papin who discovered the potential of steam pressure and built the first machine-driven ship, and Gottfried Leibniz who expanded the study of mechanics, and with his theory of monads ushered in the machine and computer age.² The performative role of the appar-



atus and its theatrical exaggeration—surface effects, grinding sounds, large dimension—are *the* referents of performance, to involve us in thought, space, time and memory. I heard an art critic say that this art attracts through an impressive new technique, but is empty otherwise. The same has been wrongly said of the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists more than a century ago. I contend with Jean-Francois Lyotard that it is more important to deposit a new discourse, as here, awe-inspiring representations, than to know its meaning. Meaning unfolds in time. That is the strategy of the art in *Spark to Pixel*, flashy and cutting edge on the

one hand, demanding on the other, slowing spectators down in order for the sights and sounds of the specters of history to emerge. *Presumption* (2000), a six-screen video projection by Du Zhenjun (China/France) was the only overtly dark subject in the show employing sensors and infrared beams. Entering the installation all remained black at fist. When moving closer to any of the six screens, loosely set up in a circle, black and white images of prisoners suddenly appeared, their bodies outlined with coloured markers. The life-sized pictures re-appear and disappear for brief moments related to the viewers' movements in the various



zones. Irrespective of the images' duration, the emaciated men can be immediately recognized as prisoners—their heads shaved and held low, their bodies barely covered. Extracted from a TV report about Bosnian prison camps, the news pictures have been reworked by Du Zhenjun to integrate notions of time—appearance, simultaneity, erasure—which are suturing devices into critical discourse. *Flow Berlin* (2007) by Erwin Redl (Austria/USA) covered the entire roof of the atrium with LED waves consisting of 30 000 light-emitting diodes, mounted on cables. The individual strings, which are switched on and off in sequence, form a gigantic wave pattern bathing everything underneath it in shades of indigo blue. "This is cool," said a teenager standing beside me as we both looked up at the virtual starry sky, in awe. Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* seems whimsical in comparison to this cosmic immensity where the stars are blinking. Can *Flow Berlin* be an excessive simulation of the sky Galilei Galileo saw when he looked through his lens to discover the composition of the Milky Way, thus drawing the sun into the centre of the solar system against beliefs held by the Church? More earthly, this is how people must have felt in the seventeenth century entering churches, like Il Gesù in Rome, awestruck by painted illusion, unable to distinguish where architecture ends and painted illusions begin. For the young spectator, the suspension of spatial boundaries through large-scale artifice must have been the attractive cool, clearly set on flow by an electronic indigo. These works can be understood as cultural excitations involving disparate performative techniques of advanced computer software that can plunge visitors into extreme environments. *Hemisphere*, a white dome hovering under the electronic sky, was the site of a colour and sound spectacle. Displayed to incredible speed, red, blue, green and gray could be perceived alongside sound bites (coming from five speakers on the ground) best described as intense murmurings or shimmering. The installation rests on calculations of fractal structures and particle systems—aesthetic plasma constantly restructured that can produce a trance state or even

dizziness in the viewer-listener. The seductive sounds intrigued me most since they attracted people for long periods of time stretched out on beanbags looking up into the *Hemisphere* with eyes closed. Notably, the colours could be seen with eyes shut due to their intensity. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk writes about such sonic landscapes as returning listeners to the familiar fetal sounds. This explains why such "new" sound bites, as here, set to various shades, are so satisfying. Listening, then, becomes an ecstatic listening.³ In *Ondulation* (2007) by Thomas McIntosh (UK/Canada) optical acoustics also play an important part, but in relation to water and its fluid behaviour. Water and colour are the visual draw together with sound waves exuding from speakers set into the walls surrounding a large, shallow water basin. Colour projections on the surface of the pool, ranging from white to greens and reds, emphasize the motion of the water, which are reflected on the wall behind it, the water acting as a liquid mirror. Zen monks rake their stone gardens for hours in order to reach the curvilinear surface patterns achieved here by sonic vibrations. Meditatively, people sat on benches fascinated by the water's changing surface as a result of sound waves and this, in the centre of a stately room. Overhead, brown old woodcarvings on the ceiling contrasted with the flat design of the pool below, historicizing the installation. Water has been a central artistic medium in the antique villa, revived in the Renaissance and Baroque where grottos were the hit among visitors due to watering surprises. Michel Montaigne, in his Italian journal, records a visit to the Villa Pratolino where "by a single movement the whole grotto is filled with water and all the seats squirt water up to your bottom as you fly ... a thousand water jets will bath you."⁴ While no such tricks are a part of *Ondulation*, the water itself is the element of surprise turning into a liquid frieze or painting, the result of various engineering techniques. Leaving this impressive installation, I also thought of water in an environmental context, as a precious resource worthy of display. The video-work *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu, Berlin* (2002) by Marie Maquaire (France/Canada) is exactly as the title implies, an exhaustive projection "thrown" on the floor, walls and ceiling. People had to traverse and go through the art in order to continue their parcours. This passageway of an installation shows images of Berlin taken from the moving *S-Bahn* (Berlin's above-ground metro railway) with focus on the Eastern part, the former Soviet sector. The shots are familiar for locals – houses in need of renovation, empty spaces, concrete blocks and large, unused buildings where the property rights are not yet cleared—all parts of a metropolis in the long recovery process from an oppressive regime. Maquaire's work is doubly important here. Firstly, for a productive disorienting aesthetic that plunges the city momentarily into an abyss as you step onto familiar spots, and secondly, as art made by a woman within this exhibition. In sum, the works presented here relating to fire, sound, light, water and electricity are truly formidable, many of which are shown for the first time in Berlin, some having a world premier. But I bemoan the lack of women artists participating. Can it really be that women are less interested in large-scale electronic media or sound art, or was it simply a fluke by the curator who selected internationally, irrespective of, or not concerned with gender?

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Maria Zimmermann Brendel who holds a Ph.D. from McGill University, in Montreal, works as an art critic in Berlin.

NOTES

- ¹ Timothy Murray, *Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance, Video and Art* (London: Routledge), 1997, p. 79. Notably the otherwise informative Press Pack of *From Spark to Pixel* addresses exclusively a male reader/spectator. Women are left out of language entirely.
- ² Florian Matzner, *Nam June Paik: Baroque Laser* (Ostfildern: Cantz) 1995, p. 40.
- ³ Peter Sloterdijk, *Der Ästhetische Imperativ* (Hamburg: Philo & Fine Arts), 2007, p. 56.
- ⁴ Michel Montaigne, *Journal*, p. 186 in E. Battisti, "Natura Artificiosa to Natura Artificialis," *Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium, The Italian Garden*, Washington D. C., 1972, p. 31.

